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# IN A VAIN SHADOW.

A *Novel*.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY

EVANGELINE F. SMITH.

“ This should have been a noble creature : he  
Hath all the energy which would have made  
A goodly frame of glorious elements,  
Had they been wisely mingled ; as it is,  
It is an awful chaos—light and darkness—  
And mind and dust—and passions and pure thoughts—  
Mix’d and contending without end or order,  
All dormant or destructive : he will perish,  
And yet he must not ; \* \* \* \* \*  
For such are worth redemption.

BYRON.

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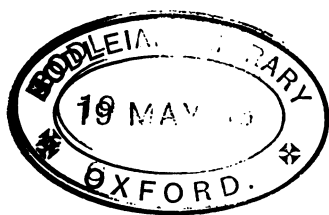
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# IN A VAIN SHADOW.

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## CHAPTER I.

Sad storm whose tears are vain,  
Bare woods whose branches stain,  
Deep caves and dreary main  
Wail for the world's wrong.

SHELLEY.

It was nearly a fortnight before the Duchess Dowager of Naseby was well enough for her nephew to leave her sick bed, and in the meanwhile his children led a sequestered life in his Castle of Rotherhame, compelled by a wild season of storm and tempest to find exercise and amusement within doors. A tremendous south-wester was blowing great guns without—a wind which, having travelled from America to the distant shores of the Mother Island, seemed to have caught strength and violence from the great Atlantic over which it passed, and raged with a destructive fury before which trees, spires and chimneys fell ready victims. The Castle sustained a more desperate siege than ever it had since the day when the Round-heads' cannon had been planted before its keep. *Here and there great plants of cling-*



ing ivy were torn off bodily, leaving the wall beneath stripped and bare. Windows were broken, the top of a roofless tower at the west end of the ramparts was brought down one night with a crash which scared all the sleepers in the house out of their rest, and sent some to their knees under the impression that the Judgment Day had arrived. Never were such nights as those! such a roaring in the forest, such a tumult of creaking branches and swelling waters, such a shaking of casements, and lashing of rain, and thundering of hail! But Rotherhame Castle had been reared by centuries of patient labour, and walls eight feet thick do not yield readily to artillery, time, or tide. Morning after morning found it grimly unchanged, and morning by morning Miss Oliver, having first terrified herself by hearkening to the servants' tales of damage and shipwreck wrought in the night, would call her brood about her, and give thanks that "while others had been visited with accident and sudden death, they were still preserved—the living—to praise Heaven for its goodness." The ruins themselves, but for that one unhappy pinnacle, with its heavy coronal of fatal ivy, stood the strain gallantly. Perhaps the gale, taken into the deserted chambers, welcomed in through widening fissures and glassless casements, was disposed to deal kindly with the place that housed him thus hospitably; at all events the graceful pointed arches and

slender mullions of the ruins remained intact as the massy Norman towers, which the Ironsides' cannon has lurched forward till they hung perilously over the moat below.

Meantime Ralph lay sick in the privacy of Little John's Tower, tended by Granny Weedon. An interdict still prevented his sisters from visiting him, and although its justification was supposed to lie in the excitable state of his nerves and the necessity of quiet, the young girls could not avoid inhaling the suspicion which permeated the household, and felt sure that their brother was not merely physically ailing, but had done something or other to disgrace himself.

One wild evening the rain temporarily abated, and Miss Oliver, albeit with many misgivings as she looked out on the tempestuous sky, could not find it in her heart to refuse her pupils' entreaties for a drive, so the great shut landau was ordered round, and the party put on their furs and prepared to venture forth into the half-drowned world.

The rivers had everywhere overflowed their banks, and the great reach of pastureland stretching away to the east of the forest was entirely flooded. Trees and hedgerows peeped forth disconsolately out of the water, forlorn gates and isolated palings marked the otherwise vanished boundaries of the meadows, and cows and horses stood shivering in familiar lanes, now transformed into

water-courses. In the west the sky was clear—the clouds were backing away before the approach of the smiling sun, as Republicans who do unwilling reverence to a falling monarch's face, but behind his back they were gathering purple and threatening, as though his royal presence alone restrained them from pouring forth the full torrent of their pent up wrath.

It was nearly an hour before the carriage emerged from the soaked brown forest, and the sea appeared in sight. Huge waves came bounding in, shaking their white manes in magnificent, inhuman, fatal play. Their boom was re-echoed again and again from the hollow caves of the out-stretching coast, and far as the eye could reach, the children of civilization, standing on the limit of their cultured world of intellect and progress, could look into the kingdom of desolation—the vast expanse of unresting, unfruitful, eternal tumult, tossing and sinking, whirling and thundering, as it had for the past thousand ages of creation. Why reproach the Creator that He has given two-thirds of this fair world to the sway of a creature without soul or intellect, who neither learns nor loves? Is the universe so small that He cannot spare some portion of His myriad planets for beauty and for wonder? that man, when he has marred Nature's fair imprints on the habitable earth, planted cabbages for heath, brick *villas* for trees, levelled hills, and desecrated

solitudes, shall still have left him some lonely wilds, in which his soul may refresh itself with the grand confession : " I cannot master, and I cannot understand ! "

The carriage at last reached a low, unprotected sand road, on a level with the beach, and Miss Oliver, disliking to find herself in such unguarded proximity to the advancing tide, pulled the check-string and bade the coachman turn homewards.

Phillippa had pulled down the window, and they were all busy gazing and talking, when the sound of a horse's hoofs advancing from behind was heard, and suddenly Lord Rotherhame's black Arabian pulled up before them, trembling in every limb from the contagious excitement of the wind.

" It is father ! " cried Lettice joyfully. " Oh, Papa ! have we really got you back at last ? "

" Yes, Lettice, here I am sure enough," and Lord Rotherhame, dismounting, came forward to receive the eager caresses of his daughter. " Glad to see you again, my sweet little girl ! And how are you, Miss Oliver ? I walked from the station, and when I got home they told me that you had all gone out to watch the waves. What a carriage-full ! It makes one enter sympathetically into the sensations of the unlucky old lady who lived in a shoe."

" And *how* is the Duchess ? " enquired Miss Oliver, contriving to make her voice

heard through the chatter of the children. "We have had no bulletin for three days now, and are all feeling anxious, although, as I constantly reminded the dear girls, 'no news is good news.'"

"Thanks! she has turned the corner at last. It was a hard tussle, but yet I never felt seriously uneasy. She told me when I first got to her that she did not mean to die, and I have never yet known my aunt forced into doing anything she did not choose."

"So like her Grace! Just one of her funny speeches!" answered Miss Oliver, with a sigh of vast relief. The Duchess was the reigning goddess of the little lady's mental firmament, but not all her greatness and distinction could hide from her devotee the fact, that the brilliant, witty old card player had never made nor cared to make her peace with Heaven, and Miss Oliver had gone through much inward misery during the past week in picturing to herself the ducal soul writhing in nether fires. Prolonged life meant a fresh lease of hope, and her simple soul rejoiced that her Grace was, at all events, to enjoy a reprieve.

"You should cross the bridge to the lighthouse before you go home," said Lord Rotherhame, opening the carriage door. "The tide is coming in grandly over the rocks, and you can get a glimpse of last night's wreck—the 'Royal Adelaide'! Will *you venture, Miss Oliver?*"

"Wherever you think proper, Lord Rotherhame. I only hope the little ones will be able to keep upon their legs, poor dears."

It was no easy task to cross the wooden bridge that connected the shore with the rocky ledge on which the lighthouse was built. The planks were laid a few inches apart, and through their chinks the green waves could be seen leaping and hungrily opening their great jaws, while the force of the wind in that unsheltered spot well nigh lifted the children's light feet into the air. Clinging to the balustrade they managed to cross in safety, and stood presently on the black Wolf's Eye Crag, the sea seething and boiling all around, the blast shrieking in their ears and arbitrarily silencing all attempts at speech. Not many paces off two men, standing on the edge of the rocks, gazed towards a dark shattered hulk that, a hundred yards out to sea, swayed helplessly to and fro, as though a spirit moved it from beneath—the shapeless relic of what last night had been a tight and gallant little schooner. One of these persons was Ned Weedon, the policeman, who, on recognising his foster-brother, greeted him with an obsequious salute. Lord Rotherhame responded with a careless nod, and drawing nearer to the verge took off his hat, and let the evening breeze blow freshly through his hair.

"Who are you bowing to, Daddy?"

enquired Edward wonderingly. "Are you going to say your prayers?"

"I'm making my bow to old Neptune, Eddy. Don't you see his grey dripping head between the waves out yonder?"

"Neptune! O, father, he is in our lesson-book! You mustn't talk to us about him in play hours."

"Is that contrary to etiquette? I humbly apologise! Look where you are going, boy," he added, as Edward rushed boisterously forward, and he caught nervously at his great-coat. "You don't want to turn yourself into a supper for cormorants, do you?"

They lingered a few minutes longer, and then retraced their steps. The man who stood with the policeman on the rocks, a middle-aged person of rather gentlemanlike bearing, preceded them by a few yards, and Weedon, who had run on before them, was holding open the carriage door with uncovered head. Lord Rotherhame shut the door on the ladies and children, laughingly declined to make a sixth in the party, and took his horse from the footman's hand. "I can't congratulate you on your courage last night, Weedon," he remarked carelessly, as he mounted. "Is it true that you heard thieves breaking into your cottage, and hid your head under the blankets, leaving them to walk off with as many of your mother's treasures as they took a fancy to?"

Weedon turned a purply red, and broke out into an unintelligible explosion of stuttering excuses. "How could I tell what a shameful t—t—t—trick they buoys was a playin' me, my Lard? For all I knew there was ten ruffians and more with cocked pistols outside. There's been a whole gang of cut-throats down from London going about the country, robbing of farmhouses and committing murder, and I don't know what more."

"Draw the line at murder, Ned. I am told that the bloodthirsty ruffians have hitherto confined themselves to the slaughter of cocks and hens."

"Her Majesty's perlice is the most h'obnoxious body in the country to the criminal classes, my Lard. If I'd had the shadder of a chance agen 'em, I'd have snapped my fingers at the danger! But I don't hold with throwin' away my life without there's a call for it, more perticklar when there's an aged parent dependin' on me."

"Discretion is the better part of valour all the world over," returned Lord Rotherhame, laughing negligently. "I'm afraid though, your unfortunate mistake of last night will have cut out plenty of work for you in the future. The village scapegraces, whom your very eye has hitherto awed into good behaviour, will have learnt that even a policeman is but human. Let go my rein"—as Weedon began anew to pour forth an eager



though humble self defence—"you must contrive henceforward, Ted, to be sharp as well as valorous."

The policeman obeyed with another bow of yet lowlier obsequiousness, and Lord Rotherhame rode off after the carriage, which by this time had entered the shadow of the forest. Weedon looked after him with an expression of sulky ill-will, and involuntarily shook his fist. Suddenly, with an uneasy start, he discovered that he was watched. The strange gentleman had drawn closer to him, and was standing at his elbow, smiling. Weedon turned upon him with an angry stare, as if to ask his business.

"Excuse me," said the stranger, answering the look, and civilly touching his hat, "but could you tell me the name of the gentleman who has been talking to you? He is so like a friend of mine, that I am curious to know whether there is any relationship between them."

"That gentleman, sir, was the h'Earl of Rotherhame," returned Weedon, recovering his habitual air of importance, in the hope that the stranger had heard nothing of his conversation with his Lordship. "The children you saw standin' with him on the rocks, was the Honourable Hedward and the Lady 'Arols, just returning to the Castle, sir, after an hour's hairing in their carriage and pair."

*Even through the falling shades of evening*

an acute observer might have noticed the deep flush which mounted to the stranger's face as he received this announcement. "Indeed," he answered, "then we are not far from Rotherhame Castle, I suppose"—then after a minute's pause: "I have often heard its fame, and am anxious to get a sight of it. What is its distance from this?"

"A matter of four miles through the forest, and half so far again by the road," said the policeman.

"Could I sleep there to-night? Is there any inn in the village where I could find a bed?"

"Certainly! The 'Arold Arms—the 'Arold is a first-class place to put up at. If you're disposed for company, I'm on my way to the village at this moment, and could show you the short cut through the 'oods."

The stranger accepted willingly, and the two walked on together discussing the weather, and other indifferent topics. Weedon's "short cut" to Rotherhame might be shorter indeed, measured by yards, than the authorized approach by the high-road, but taken at night, under the thick shadows of the forest trees, it was by no means the speediest way of attaining the desired destination. Only one to the manner born could have found his way as Edward Weedon did through the bewildering maze of invisible trunks and copse wood, *up and down grassy slopes, by*

the side of swampy pools, and past hollows filled breast-high with rotting leaves. His companion soon lost all idea of the whereabouts of north, south, east and west, and followed his guide with a mingling of blind trust and extreme amazement, plying him the while with question after question on the neighbourhood, the Rotherhame property, and the history and present condition of the family that owned it. The forest seemed a kind of sanctuary into which the winds of heaven dared not intrude their boisterous presence, but overhead the storm could be heard howling in the tree tops, and the great branches swayed and tossed ominously to and fro. Ever and anon the wild cry of some startled bird was heard, or a sound of flying footsteps betokened the neighbourhood of deer.

"Are we far from Culpepper Heath now?" enquired the stranger, after a prolonged silence.

"Culpepper He'th, sir? We're just on its borders. 'Tis a large he'th, and I've heard say was mostly firwood in the old times, but in the Civil Wars the Lord Rotherhame that then was had the most of the trees cut down for the sarvice of the Crown."

"And in what direction lies the pond, the scene of the murder that was done here five years since?"

"H'out there, sir," and he jerked his *thumb towards the east*. "I had ought to

be able to tell you more about that than most," he added, rolling out his words with unctuous importance, "seein' as how I am h'own brother to the victim of the atrocity."

His companion started. "Is it possible! You brother to Marley," he added, *sotto voce*, with a slight laugh. "The likeness is not striking certainly."

"Marley was not his reel name, sir, that was h'only a alias. But you don't mean to say that you was acquainted with our pore Chawles! That's a remawkable cohincidence indeed!"

"I knew him intimately out in America, Mr. Weedon. He married a dear little sister of mine, and it was through me that they first got to know each other. I have come into these parts for the express purpose of seeking out his relations, and it is strange indeed that I should stumble upon one of them in this accidental way."

"Quite a pertickler h'act of Providence, reely now. You're heartily welcome, sir—Mr. Middleton, I presooome, as you're brother to Chawles's wife. There! Mother'll be as pleased as Punch to see'ee, and hear all you have to tell her about Chawles. 'Tis precious little I mind about him, myself. He 'listed, you see, and went off to Canida a'most before we younger chaps was out of pinafores, and then, not liking the service, he deserted, and we could never find out what had gone w'im. Mother, she went on wonderin' and won-

derin' about 'im, and he never writin' to say were he was alive or dead, till all of a sudden he turned up again like a bad penny. One evenin' 'twas, five year ago come next December."

"Poor fellow, December! the fatal month! What an evening it must have been for his mother when she found her prodigal returned."

Weedon burst into a prolonged hee-haw. "Sir!" he said, "betwixt you and me and the post, I don't know that mother ever was that mad about the loss of her dear buoy, let alone that a feller skulking away from justice is but a misfortun' to a fam'ly that has always kep itself respicktable. She's a good little 'ooman is mother, and she'd ha' done a deal better by us all if it hadn't been for her nobility up to the Castle. She was a changed 'ooman to us from the moment that she weaned me to nurse the present Earl. We, her flesh and blood, was just dirt to her compared to her 'little nobleman,' as she used to call him. 'Tis the same to this day, Mr. Middleton, she'd rather I was all of one solid rack of pains, than that his Lordship should have a finger-ache."

"And is he fond of her?" asked Middleton, thoughtfully. "It is melancholy to think what a poor return is sometimes made to an old servant for a faithful devotion which falls little short of the heroic."


"*Oh, bless you!* he's most particklar fond

of her. Why, she's her own room kep for her at the Castle, to go to whenever she's minded. I don't complain that my one remaining parent should put another 'ooman's son before her own," the policeman continued, rising to a sublime height of magnanimous self-abnegation, "'tis a comfort, sir, to know as she'll never want for nothin'! She's provided for, sir, is mother, in this world and the next."

Mr. Middleton did not stop to enquire whether this last consolatory consideration had respect to the future disposal of Mrs. Weedon's body with decent funeral rites, or to the ultimate condition of her emancipated soul. He listened however to his companion's confidential communications with a sincere and gratifying attention.

"If I am not mistaken," he said at last, with a good-humoured laugh and an attempt to see the policeman's features through the gathering gloom, "you don't altogether share your mother's infatuation for her aristocratic foster-son. I fancied you did not quite enjoy his conversation on the shore just now, when his Lordship took it into his head to make you the butt of his witticisms."

Weedon swelled with indignation and perplexity, divided between resentment at having been made fun of, prudent fear of betraying to any outsider his hidden antipathy to the *patron of his family*, and desire



to account for the occurrence of the previous night in a manner creditable to his good sense and courage. He became almost unintelligible, at one moment roundly abusing his Lordship's impudence, at another, wildly praising his many virtues, and again elaborately explaining the satanic depth of craft in the village boys, whose last night's escapade might have resulted fatally to one or more of their number, had not the policeman's compassion for his aged parent restrained him from a sanguinary exhibition of his prowess.

Mr. Middleton entered sympathetically into his successive phases of feeling. "To me," he said at last, "brought up in free America, there is nothing more repugnant than this insolence of the great, which makes them treat human beings, worthy and intelligent as themselves, as so many animals, to be alternately kicked and caressed. I wonder, Mr. Weedon, that a person of your sense and independence should tamely submit to such humiliating treatment from any man, however great, or even whatever the tie of interest between you."

At this outspoken reproach the policeman again drew in his horns, and almost involuntarily gave his companion to understand that there were solid reasons why he should endure with patience Lord Rotherhame's arrogance; it was plain that Mr. Weedon, no less than his mother, was looking forward *to be* "provided for in this world and the

next." The two men, thrown by circumstances into closer intimacy than is ordinarily the case in the first hour of acquaintanceship, were growing very confidential, and Weedon evidently revelled in the prospect of bringing home a person of such genteel appearance, to be introduced to the neighbours as his own family-connection.

"But now let me hear something more about my poor friend Marley—the name I knew him by in the States will always come first to my lips—I want to know about your first meeting with him after his return to England. Did you recognise him at first sight?"

"I never had the good luck to glimpse my pore brother, Mr. Middleton, till the hour I seed him, a bloody corpse in his helm coffin, on the table at the 'Traveller's Rest.' In fact, I was in London at the time, and read about the murder in the paper before ever I'd a notion that the murdered man was any kin of ours, or even so much as knew that Charley had turned up. Tibbetts I knowed, of course, and had often said as how he'd find his way some day to the 'Ouse of Correction. He was a idle good-for-nothin' chap, Peter was, greedy as a Jew for coin. That's what 'tis said he done it for."

"It is an extraordinary fact that not one of the neighbours should have recognised your brother. If I remember right, he passed himself off in the *village* as a stranger."



"The old Countess was the h'only person mother ever breathed the truth to, Mr. Middleton; she'd not been used to keep a secret from her missus. You see, Chawles was mortal afraid lest the police should find out who he was and march him off."

"But tell me, could *you* identify the body?" asked Middleton in a low hurried tone. "Was there any family resemblance, any—?"

"No, sir. Everyone that seen Chawles was of the same mind—that he featured neither feyther nor mother. But either way, death had changed him by the time I saw him. His eyes was 'acked to pieces, and his features disturbed and cut about 'orrible, and then he'd been in the water, and what with one thing and another he didn't hardly look like a man at all."

Middleton shuddered, and raised his hand, as if to stem the torrent of ghastly details.

"But if he had no likeness to either of his parents," he burst in hastily, "and had been out of England for more than thirty years, how was it your mother could satisfy herself that he really was her son?"

"By his own word, of course. What should he say he was for if he wasn't? There warn't nothing to be got by it."

"And that he did say so you have no evidence but the word of these two old women, mistress and servant, sworn to stand *by each other* through thick and thin.

Listen to me, my friend, this murdered man and I lived together for forty years on terms of closest intimacy. I was the confidant of all his motives for returning to the old country. I saw him embark with his child. I knew what was the end he set before him, and what he carried in the knapsack, whose priceless value occasioned his destruction. But he never spoke of you to me—he never, that I remember, mentioned the name of Weedon in my hearing.”

Weedon gaped. “Wa-all! it only shows he must ha’ been uncommon close with you,” he answered. “I don’t know what else you can be drivin’ at.”

Middleton stumbled on for some seconds in silence, and the moaning of the wind sounded drearily in the lull of conversation. Presently he stopped short, and laid a heavy hand on Weedon’s arm. The policeman started apprehensively. The stranger’s conduct was mysterious and alarming; they had been speaking of a tragedy, and they were alone together in a lonely place.

“I wonder if you are the man I take you to be,” said Middleton slowly, “the man to enlist with me in an adventurous enterprise which may make your fortune; whether you have spirit enough to risk tens that you may gain thousands?”

“Sir!” responded Weedon, tremulously.

“Swear to me on your truth as a Christian,” said Middleton, *in a voice which thrilled with*

excitement, "that you will keep secret as the grave what I am about to tell you, till the time is ripe to publish it far and wide."

"Mr. Middleton, I am a police officer. There may be things as my dooty to the country would oblige me to—to—."

"Your duty would oblige you to give me all the help in your power. But no matter! there are plenty of others to be found. If you have not the heart of a man in you to share my labours, my gains—"

He let go his arm, an action which produced an instant revolution in Weedon's manner. "Now don't 'ee be so hasty, Mr. Middleton. If not contrairy to my dooty to the country, I'm ready to stand by ye through thick and thin. I'll keep your secret, there's my hand on it! The treuth, the 'ole treuth and nothin' but the treuth, so 'elp me God!"—and having concluded the official formula, he cast his eye round him for a Testament. But the forest not abounding in such productions, he had to make the best of the deficiency, and sealed his oath with an emphatic smacking of the lips.

"Good then!" said Middleton solemnly. "Weedon! the poor fellow murdered on Culpepper Heath was no brother of yours. He was the *rightful Earl of Rotherhame and Berkeley*, and the man who before the world bears that title, knows the truth of what I say as well as I, or God in Heaven above!"

## CHAPTER II.

Thrice is he armed that hath his quarrel just,  
And he but naked though locked up in steel,  
Whose conscience with injustice is corrupted.

SHAKESPEARE.

WEEDON staggered and remained speechless.

"Take it in thoroughly," resumed Middleton. "Don't be in a hurry to speak."

"Sir," stammered the policeman, "you're not feelin' quite well, I fear."

"I am perfectly well, thank you, or, to speak plainly, not in the least screwed. You see I walk as straight as the brushwood will allow me."

"Mis-ter Middleton," resumed Weedon, as his companion turning from him pushed slowly forward, "I shall be much obligated to you to let me know the manin' of your language concerning my Lord. What you've a said, sir, is true enough—there ain't much love lost betwixt he and I, but t'will take a deal to make me believe he'd go agen the law in anything; him that's sat on the Bench and sent dozens to the treadmill."

"He may before long change places from the Bench to the Bar," said Middleton solemnly. "If God prospers my undertaking—and He will not assuredly always let iniquity prevail—you will at no distant date see the man who *calls himself* Lord Rotherhame

stand out before his country to defend himself on a charge of life and death."

"Sir," interrupted Weedon impatiently, "I am on the rack. Oblige me by displaining yourself."

"I will do so as briefly as I can. Have you ever heard speak of a half-brother of the late Countess, a boy called Simon, who quarrelled with his family, ran away from home, and was commonly supposed to have been drowned at sea?"

"I've heerd the h'old people tell about him scores of times, and there is a 'andsome marble moniment put up to him in church."

"Well then, that very person was living in America for near forty years after his supposed death by drowning, and might have been living still if the devil had not put it into the heart of his own near kindred to destroy him. My heart misgave me for him when he first made up his mind to go back to England. I told him it would be better to remain in safe obscurity, and reminded him that the only happy time he had ever known had been since he had been separated from his relations, who looked down on him and hated him—but I little dreamed that they would be diabolical enough to plan his death. Can you fancy what I felt when the news reached me of the Culpepper murder? For a long while previously business troubles and other worries had been terribly affecting my health, and

this new shock put the finishing stroke. I was seized with a dangerous illness, and my brain was affected to such a degree that for a long period I had to be watched and cared for like a child. Slowly, very slowly, I recovered; I was for four years merely the shadow of a man, and utterly incapable of facing the labour of my present enterprise."

"Chawles still alive, and Master Simon never drowned!" ejaculated the policeman, with an air of hopeless stupefaction.

"Yes, you see how cleverly the whole lying story was elaborated between your mother and her wicked mistress. Let me tell you how it is that I am in a position to prove the truth of my statement. When I was a lad, I was for four or five years in the St. Dunstan's Grammar School. There I often saw members of the Harold family, and, in particular, poor Simon, who once came with his father when he gave away the prizes at our half-yearly examination. I, as head boy, was introduced to him, and we had some talk together. A month or two later, I sailed for America, to begin work in my father's office, and on the way out we picked up a half-drowned lad, the only survivor of a dozen people who had escaped in a boat from the wreck of a merchantman, bound for the Cape. The boat had been swamped just before we came upon it; it was bottom upwards, and this wretched boy was clinging to it for life. To my utter amazement I at once

recognised in the miserable, soaked, cabin-boy, the handsome young swell, whom I had been rather proud of talking to on the prize day at St. Dunstan's. We made fast friends during the remainder of our voyage. He engaged me to keep his secret jealously, and told me that he was immovably resolved never to see his hated family again, or to be beholden to their charity for a farthing. He would live as his mother's people had lived before him, and earn his bread by honest work. On our arrival in America, I got my father to employ him, and he worked his way up steadily. He was very lovable in many ways, but his hatred of aristocrats amounted to a frenzy. He was proud of his plebeian blood, and I verily believe that, when after the death of both his brothers, he made up his mind to go home and disturb his sister's tenure of the Earldom, it was more out of a desire to revenge himself upon her, and to do effectual damage to the privileged classes, than from any motive of personal ambition."

"Well, who'd ever ha' thought it!" put in Weedon.

"Simon's wife had died without knowing the secret of her husband's birth," continued Middleton. "When he left for England he took with him his only child, and a knapsack containing proofs which he had carefully put together of his identity—letters, family trinkets, and miniatures which had *come to him through* his mother, the register

of his marriage, and of the child's birth, a minute account of his childhood and youth drawn up for the purpose by himself, together with a statement, written by me, of all particulars with which I was personally acquainted, and of my recognition of him. I was to follow him, the state of my health permitting, as soon as he required my evidence. You see now, that with me as a witness to his identity and those collected proofs, he had an almost certain prospect of establishing his case. He set sail full of hope. I watched them out of sight, he and the child together, and they waved good-bye till the gathering twilight hid the black outline of the steamer from my view. I heard once again from him after that, and then the Great Silence settled down between us."

He drew from his pocket a leather case, in which were candle and matches, struck a light, and stooping down where the bushes made a shelter from the night-wind, put a crumpled paper into Weedon's hands. The policeman, puffing and blowing with excitement, raised it close to his eyes and slowly read as follows :—

"The 'Harold Arms,'

"Rotherhame, St. Dunstan's.

"DEAR HENRY,

"One line to tell you that I am once more safe in England—the mother country, which has been such a hard step-mother to me.



There is no time now to tell you anything more than bare facts, but I will write again by the next mail. I am anxiously looking out for news of your health, and fervently hope that you are not tormenting yourself with unnecessary anxiety on our account. I have seen my sister. She is grey, but still handsome; only, for my part, I would rather have a gurgoyle's ugliness than her beauty—cold, worldly, sensual and devilish. We did not fly into each other's arms; she could not be expected to go that length with a shabby-genteel sojourner at the village pot-house; but she knew me at the first word, and looked as if she would have swooned. She recovered herself quickly, and oh! how I felt the old loathing creep up within me when I heard the hard, measured accents of her refined, low voice, and saw the cold hatred steal into her eyes. We understand each other now; she knows that I will not be a second time expatriated by her; that I mean her to taste the bitter cup she made me drink; that I will turn her from the door, as she turned me. Am I cruel? Oh! if I am, I am smarting under such wrongs as few have borne! I can never relent towards the she-devil who broke my mother's heart and reviled her when she was dead—who lied away my father's love from me.

“But you must not think that we two are uncivil. I have not yet learnt indeed to gloss *over my real feelings* with the varnish of

aristocratic falsehood, but she, who with all her pride is base as mud, has abandoned her first insolence, and has become reasonable, supplicating, almost touching. She has done her best to persuade me to forget old grudges, settle the business amicably, and *trust my papers* for a few days in her hands, that she may 'consult the family lawyer' about them. This I declined, suggesting politely that they might possibly miscarry on their way to the learned man. But one point I conceded. I have promised her a fortnight in which she may consider her course of action. In the meantime I have only to wait patiently. I may possibly go to London for a few days to try what sort of reception your mother will give me. At the present moment the secret is known to no soul but you, my sister and myself.

"The most important thing I have to talk over with your mother is the decision I have come to, to change my will. I don't think that any sentiment about poor Fanny's wishes ought to make me consent to an arrangement which, in the event of my death, would leave my little Dolly to the charge of a person who has never seen her, and whom I cannot help suspecting to be worldly-minded and not very warm-hearted. Fanny was always very fond of Mabel Bradshaw, as you know, but I trust your judgment of character more than I do hers, and as you say that, spite of your delicacy of health, you do not shrink from

undertaking the child's guardianship, I shall, while I am in town, make out a new will to that effect. It will make me easier in my mind about the poor innocent. God forbid that she should ever suffer as I suffered in my childhood!

"I used to think myself, when I was still out in America, that I should find a savage pleasure in tearing down the old Castle—the strong, beautiful symbol of feudal barbarism and oppression, where I had been so miserable, and where my gentle mother had pined to death. And yet, when I ascended the grand, green slope, and saw the mighty towers leaning over the moat, the birds passing at their own sweet wills through the ruined casements, and the wild ivy embracing the crumbling stones with filial fondness, my inmost heart was thrilled with awe and compunction. I perceived that God had been with men in those past Ages of Tyranny, even as He is now. He could not make them love Right nor Liberty, but they did let Him teach them how to build. My hand shall never mar His works; the old Castle shall not by me be hurried to premature destruction. It shall go down to the grave with all honour and with all tears, and in the meanwhile shall belong freely to the People, to the children of those who patiently reared it for the poor reward of a hovel-home and a crust of bread. Already a large part lies in ruins, and Nature is sending in all her wild winds, her pure airs

and rains, to drive away the clinging miasma of cruelty and wrong.

"I hope to have some more definite news to give you in my next, but the small barmaid has come in to let me know that the postman is in sight, and I must close for this week. Little Dolly is as cheerful as a skylark, and is my close companion. I love her all the better that her blood is only one-fourth tainted with the blue patrician essence. If Cicely Harold wrongs my little one, may God demand it of her, and of her children after her to the third and fourth generation, till they are consumed off the face of the earth!"

"Yours ever,

"SIMON MARLEY.

"(Or, in the language of barbarism),

"ROTHERHAME and BERKELEY."

"Wa-all, I can't think how you be a goin' to prove it," concluded Weedon, after a short discussion. "You bain't a goin' to tell me," he went on, as if suddenly awakening to the full import of Middleton's charge, "that his Lordship was a party to the murder! His Lordship a murderer! His Lordship hung! No, it ain't pawsible! He stands above suspicion!"

"God defends the right," said Middleton, an assurance which brought but little support to the orthodox but unspiritual mind of his confederate. "It is true that Simon's collec-

tion of papers is lost, and that without their support my bare assertion would go for little. But two things are possible. From all I have heard of him the present Earl is not a man without some notion of honour and humanity. It is conceivable that under strong temptation he may have been drawn in to take part in this crime, and yet that conscience may not be altogether dead in him. The profuse liberality of which I have heard, the splendid scale of his charities, the secluded manner of his life, are all speaking witnesses to a mind ill at ease—remorseful, yet without the courage to repent. It is a hard thing voluntarily to blacken one's own white character in the eyes of men, but the knowledge that the avenger is on his track may even now move him to make a clean breast of it, give up those papers if they are still in existence, and face the worst."

"He'd be a precious fool to go and stick his neck into the halter before he'd need to 't," interrupted Weedon, with a contemptuous sniff, "and t'ain't likely he'd keep that about him that would hang him."

"My other resource is your mother. The fact of her having sworn to the dead body being her son's, makes it evident to me that she was in Lady Rotherhame's confidence from the first. She need fear no personal danger if she turns Queen's evidence. Could we not bribe or frighten her into a confession? Both you and she should have such

a reward as would make it worth your while a hundred times over to break with your patron."

Weedon's mouth widened with a greedy smile, but after a minute's thought his face fell and he answered ruefully—

"Tain't no sort o' use tryin' anything with mother. Mother won't sell her children for money. If so be you was to offer her a thousand down, she'd sooner end her days eatin' water-gruel in the union than take it."

"Then we must go cunningly to work, and try to cheat or wheedle the truth out of her," said Middleton.

As he spoke a sudden beam of cheery light fell across his path. Two minutes more of floundering among dead bracken and dripping blackberry bushes, and they had cleared the forest and were standing before the ivied porch of an old thatched cottage. The wind burst out into a prolonged roar, and it seemed as if the spectres of the forest and the storm were lamenting to see their prey escape from their terrors to the warmth and comfort of civilized life.

"Here we be at last!" cried Weedon, as he fumbled for the latch, "not a hundred yards from the Castle as you'd see for yourself, if t'wern't as dark as a wolf's mouth. Walk in, sir, you'll not be sorry to find yourself inside four walls again."

"Your *brother's* friend remember," whispered Middleton hastily, as he followed the

policeman into an old fashioned cottage-kitchen, now glowing in the cheerful blaze of a bright wood fire.

The supper table was ready laid, a savoury odour proceeded from the saucepan on the coals, and the loud ticking of the tall eight-day clock was heard, with pleasant precision, above the uproar of the storm. The only occupant of the room was a handsome old woman of some seventy years, whose look of benevolence as she raised her head to greet her son had in it something disappointingly above suspicion.

"Shouldn't have come home late to-night, Ted, when I had a venison brile for supper. Better late than never though, so wipe your boots and come in. Oh, beg pardon! I didn't see there was a person with you."

Ted Weedon was rather needlessly long, Mr. Middleton thought, in rubbing the encrusted sides of his boots against the brick on the threshold. Perhaps the unusual, and indeed somewhat momentous circumstances under which he was entering his mother's presence, had their effect even on his elephantine nerves. At last however he advanced, and spoke with a slight huskiness of throat.

"I've good news for you, mother. Wot should you say if I told you that this here person was a gentleman from 'Merica, and that he's brought news of my brother Chawles!"

*The significance of his words penetrated to*

the woman's brain with a rapidity that astonished Middleton. But his merciless eye was on her, and he noted with unflinching vigilance the involuntary start which shook her erect from her stooping posture, and the pallor which overspread her face. By the time however that Weedon had bestowed upon him a knowing wink, she was once more herself, and said in a hard, strong voice—

“News of our Charles? This gentleman must know then what the Almighty only can. My poor Charley, God help me, sir! was called to glory as we humbly hope, this last Christmas four years.”

Middleton sighed a reassuring sigh of respectful sympathy, which he saw was marked by the old lady, who watched him as a cat would watch a mouse. Her eyes, sharp as knives, seemed to cut him as he stood, and he had much ado to keep the seemly melancholy of his features undisturbed by any untoward symptom of inward perturbation.

“News of your son in the sense of telling you of his present condition I certainly cannot offer, my poor friend,” he said. “But I may be able to tell you something of his doings and sayings at a period of his life when he was a stranger to you all. I was an intimate friend of poor Charles—his brother-in-law, in fact—and I determined to find out his family whenever I should come to England, that we might talk together on a subject so interesting to us both.”



"Thank'ee kindly," she answered, more calmly, but still with a furtive uneasiness lurking in her eye. "I am sure, sir, 'tis not everybody would go out of their way to give a pleasure to poor folks like us."

"And it is an intense pleasure, as I know, to talk of our loved and lost with those who knew and appreciated them," answered Middleton, mercilessly enjoying the almost imperceptible signs which revealed to his keen eye that the old woman was undergoing martyrdom.

He came forward and standing with her in the fitful blaze, talked in low tones for some minutes of her deceased son. Not a twitch of the jaw, not a motion of the wrinkled hand that plucked uneasily at the white apron, passed his observation, as with a grave tenderness of manner which completely took Weedon aback, he whispered to her of her sorrow, gave her the benefit of some personal reminiscences of the dead, and asked a few interested questions concerning the last tragic days.

He did not mean to put her, at that moment, through an exhaustive catechism, but he wished to compare her conduct then, with what it would be later when a brief leisure for reflection would have given her space to collect her thoughts, and to adopt some decided line. Hitherto her whole behaviour, despite her remarkable self-control, had but tended to confirm his suspicions.

Mrs. Weedon, perhaps finding the ground beneath her too hot to tread comfortably, soon made an attempt to deliver herself from her guest's embarrassing society.

"I don't know what I am thinking about," she said, "to keep this gentleman here talking to me when he's tired and hungry, and his clothes one solid dab of wet, too. You'll take a bit of something with us, sir, I hope, and let me dry your coat a bit for you while you're eating, won't ye?"

"Mr. Middleton is a going to stop here to-night," said the policeman, who had already lit his candle and stood with the tallow dripping unheeded on the ground, waiting stolidly by the staircase door. "Get a pair of sheets haired, mother, and set a place at table, and you come along with me, Mr. Middleton, and give yourself a clean."

"If the arrangement is not in any way inconvenient to you, Mrs. Weedon," interposed Middleton, with ready politeness, but without stretching his civility so far as to risk a rejection on his hostess's part, for with a bland smile he turned his back upon her, and promptly followed the policeman up the creaking stairs.

While he was washing his hands in the little attic, whose roof scarcely cleared his head, Middleton heard the door-latch click below.

Mrs. Weedon was taking advantage of his absence to release her grandchild from the

wood cupboard, in which, for some youthful indiscretion she had been in durance vile, and hastily thrusting a plateful of supper into her hands, was hurrying her out through the back door to sleep the night with Sally Tibbetts. Something more than a vague instinct of prudence had warned her that it was essential to keep out of sight that evening, the orphan child of the man murdered on Culpepper Heath.

### CHAPTER III.

'Tis midnight, on the globe dead slumber sits,  
And all is silent in the hour of sleep,  
Save when the hollow gust, that swells by fits,  
In the dark woods roars fitfully and deep.

KIRKE WHITE.

WHILE the pedestrians were wading homeward through acres of wind-blown forest-swamp, the following scene was enacting in Rotherhame Castle.

A large fire burned brightly on the hearth of the ancient library, whose light, reflected back by each panel of its polished oak wainscoting, fell with fitful glow on the backs of the many-tinted volumes with which the room was peopled. Literally *peopled*, for books, when human voices are not raised to drown their soundless speech, have a personality of their own which makes itself felt; the aged, the learned, the witty, and the dull are there in conclave, and by the experience of years seem to have come to know and understand each other.

Lord Rotherhame stood before the fire, and the ruddy coals on which his eyes unconsciously rested in sombre thought, threw a warm glow upon his stern, pallid features. The storm was raging without, and the wind dashed itself wildly against the casements. He stood thus for some minutes, cold and

motionless as a statue. At last, clasping his fingers tightly together, and drawing his breath sharply through his teeth, he roused himself, as if for a painful effort, and slowly moved towards the door.

He passed through the empty banquetting hall, and ascended the stairs of Little John's Tower. The air was chill and heavy ; it seemed somehow that that tower had an atmosphere peculiar to itself. The whole length of the banquetting hall cut it off from the mass of the castle, and standing, as it did, isolated on the border of the ruins, it appeared like a sentry between the worlds of life and death, the last outpost to mark the boundary.

Its occupants were too few to impart to it the cheerful air of habitation, and whatever warmth might have stolen down from Lord Rotherhame's bedroom fire was counteracted by the chill that the doleful Wardrobe Room, the forsaken chamber of the dead, spread around it like an unwholesome vapour.

Lord Rotherhame hesitated for a moment on the threshold of his bedchamber, then, with the look of one who goes to execution, opened the door of the adjoining room, and walked in. Granny Weedon sat knitting on one side of the hearth, and on the other Ralph lay wrapped up upon a couch. He had grown thin—very thin—since his illness, and looked little more than the shadow of the joyous youth, who full of life and eagerness,

had come home a few weeks since to keep his Christmas holidays. His eyes seemed to have grown larger through the wasting of his cheeks, and there was a look on his face as of one under a ban, a look of solitary moody suffering which aged and furrowed it. His father perceived it, and his features were contracted by a momentary spasm of pain. Neither the old woman nor her patient looked up at his entrance, but when drawing nearer he uttered the word "Granny," his quiet voice chased the dreamy look from Ralph's half-opened eyes and made him start and shiver.

"God bless me! is that you, my Lord?" exclaimed Granny, standing up to make her curtsey, while her pins fell clattering to the ground.

"I have taken you by surprise for once. Till this morning I did not know whether I could leave the Duchess."

"Well, I'm glad your Lordship's got home all right; we shall have an awful night of it. Biding quiet here and listening to the wind has set me thinking on old days, and I'd most come to fancy to myself that you was a little lad again, and that I was come up, as I used to, to sit by your bed, and keep the bogies off, until your voice reminded me how times were changed."

Lord Rotherhame scarcely seemed to hear her. His attention was absorbed by the figure on the couch, and as he looked upon it his

expression grew visibly sterner and more hard.

"Are you better?" he said, at last.

"Much better, thank you," answered Ralph, with frigid brevity.

"He's a deal better, my Lord," interposed Granny, "weak still, in course, very weak, but the fever's gone, and he sleeps as well by nights as ever he did."

"I am glad to hear it. And now let me take your place as nurse for a couple of hours." The word "nurse" had involuntarily a sarcastic ring. "I saw Ned just now on the Wolf's Eye Rocks, and he was then setting off to walk home. You must go back and get his supper ready and there will be no need for you to come again this evening; I shall be up writing late, and will look in every hour to see your patient."

"But his medicine, my Lord; he must have that at nine o'clock, and some soup afterwards, let alone food once in the night. You must let me come back when Ted's gone to bed to see to it."

"No, Granny, you want a good night's rest, and you shall have it! Show me his medicines, and tell me what I am to do, and you need not fear I shall neglect him."

Mrs. Weedon would have remonstrated further, but her foster-son's face wore an austere look which showed her that to attempt opposition would be trouble wasted. She got up meekly, gave the instructions he

required, and then slipping on her familiar poke-bonnet and checked shawl, hobbled reluctantly out of the sick-room.

Lord Rotherhame stood with his back towards the fire absorbed in thought, and apparently quite unheeding his companion's presence. It was not so with Ralph. His father's mute society chafed him almost to madness, and every feature quivered nervously as he lay back upon his couch, waiting the first word that should break the oppressive silence.

At seven o'clock Lord Rotherhame had the medicine to administer, a trust which not all his abstraction prevented him from performing punctually. When Ralph had taken it, he put the glass down upon the table, and then returning to his son's side, said in calm measured accents—

"I return to Grand Court to-morrow. As this may be the last evening we shall pass together, I think, by your leave, we will not spend it entirely in silence."

His son received the suggestion without attempting to respond to it, and Lord Rotherhame asked with some sharpness whether he were deaf.

"I have no objection to talking," Ralph answered, coldly, "except that I have nothing particular to say. I don't suppose you will be much amused if I ask whether you can skate, or comment on the roughness of the night."



"Possibly not! Neither perhaps am I inclined to make myself specially agreeable to you. But, as I said, on what promises to be the last night of our acquaintance, we should do well to say to each other all that is necessary to be said before we part."

The words struck a kind of sickness into Berkeley, but he forced himself to maintain an unmoved, even disdainful demeanour.

"The last night of our acquaintance! I did not know that it was such a simple thing for a father to drop the acquaintance of his son. Pray do you intend to cut me out-right? Or may I go the length of taking off my hat when I chance to meet you in the street?"

Lord Rotherhame's eyes flashed.

"You only disgrace yourself, sir, by making a subject so fraught with shame and pain the butt of your second-rate wit," he answered, sternly. "It appears to me that you are as devoid of good taste as you are of heart and conscience."

"I may be excused for looking on your expression about 'the last night of our acquaintance' in the light of a joke," answered Ralph, with an irrepressible quiver of the lip. "It is absolutely impossible to look on it in any other way than as a scarecrow to frighten me out of keeping my promise."

"Am I so degraded in your eyes? Do you already regard me as a boasting bully, who *threatens* what he dares not perform?"

Listen to me, Ralph. I told you that I would not keep you at home with me, nor treat you as a son, if you persisted in defying my authority. With your eyes open to the consequences, you chose to continue rebellious. I did not at once send you from home because you could not have been moved without risk to your health, but I am simply waiting, and the moment the doctor pronounces you fit to travel, you leave this place, not to return while I live. Will you believe now that I am not perpetrating a practical joke upon you ! ”

“ That you mean to turn me out ; that you and I shall not live together any more ? ” answered Ralph, as if lost in thought. “ No, I cannot believe that. It is impossible ! ”

Lord Rotherhame made a sudden movement of pain.

Ralph raised himself on his elbow, and gazed up at his father with grave earnest eyes that had in them the wondering expression of a child.

“ You could not live without me, father,” he said, quietly. “ Ever since I was born I have been your particular boy. You have taught me, we have ridden together all over the country, and you have practised me in racquets and billiards, and turned me out a good shot and an angler. You have discussed politics with me, and have continually talked of the time when I should be member *for the county*, and we should go through the

session together. We have made countless plans for the future. You may send me away for a time, but before long you will have me back again."

"Enough of this, Berkeley," returned Lord Rotherhame, on whom each word spoken by his son acted like the sun on snow.

"These ties of the past, of which you speak, were good enough reasons why you should loyally have obeyed me on a question in which your unformed judgment differed from mine, but they are no reasons at all why I should keep by me, to spread the infection of undutiful ingratitude among my children, one who, with the blood of a son, has the heart of an alien. Spare yourself the pain of resisting the inevitable. You go from Rotherhame the day that you can travel without danger to your health."

"And you expect me to acquiesce quietly in that?" exclaimed Ralph passionately. "You think I shall submit to be driven out of my home—the only place on earth I care for—from the old people, Mr. Daubeny, and the servants? Never again to see Eddy nor my sisters! Never to see you! Even though once—God forgive me!—you almost made me hate you, father, I cannot even imagine life without you. Has one offence killed all your love for me? Don't you really care whether I am here or gone, alive or dead?"

Lord Rotherhame hung his head before the concentrated pain and reproach of

Berkeley's words. He rallied, however, and answered in a voice which, though low, was clear and firm.

"Unfortunately I cannot profess indifference for you. It is more possible that I might come to return your feeling, and hate you. For this reason, if for no other, it is better that we two should part company. Near, the sight of you would exasperate me—lead me, perhaps, into feelings and actions which would be harmful to us both; but separated, I should still feel for you—at least for the boy who once was mine—a pitying, kindly tenderness. By your own choice you have deliberately cut yourself off from the past, and now your best wisdom will be to bury it in quick oblivion."

"My God! Am I to be utterly cast off?"

"Do not call on God," returned the father, bitterly. "I tried it once in mortal agony, but I did not find Him very open to compunction."

There was a pause. Ralph had turned his face away, and Lord Rotherhame suspected that he wept. Self-reproach, doubts, questionings as to whether he had not mistaken self-will for duty, an acute consciousness of being cursed by one to whom he had been wont to look for blessings, shrinkings from the unknown, passionate clings to home and kindred—these all surged tumultuously within a heart which, hitherto stunned by

amazement, was now wrung by keenest pangs of wounded love.

Lord Rotherhame bore the silence as long as he could, and then came closer to the sofa.

"Do not distress yourself too much," he said, in a voice that trembled, and that had in it a sort of intended kindness. "You will not feel the loneliness so bitterly as you anticipate, for you are young, and in youth wounds soon heal over. I have arranged for you to travel with a clever and pleasant tutor, and you can write to me and tell me of any wishes you form for your future. Till you are of age this gentleman will remain with you, whether you go to Oxford or choose another career for yourself, and by the time he leaves you you will have formed fresh ties, and the old faces and habits will have receded into the background of your mind. This place will be your own one day, perhaps while you are still young enough to get some pleasure out of it."

This last suggestion cut yet deeper into the wound it was designed to salve, and Berkeley, with a desperate effort to keep his voice steady, answered coldly—

"I will not trouble you by discussing the point further."

"Nor I you," returned his father in a very low tone. "If I have omitted anything that ought to have been said, I will write it to you. God forgive us both!" And then, as

if impelled by some irresistible fatherly impulse, he added, "Do nothing unworthy of a gentleman when you go out into the world, Berkeley. For the sake of Auld Lang Syne say a prayer now and then, and do a kindness to the poor and friendless when the chance comes in your way. That's my last will and testament to my dutiful son and heir."

No laugh accompanied this closing sentence, although it was spoken in the tone of a bitter jest. Berkeley turned round suddenly and looked on his father, who was about to leave him. It seemed to him that his face had become all eyes, so strangely did those large and mournful luminaries dominate the sphere in which they dwelt. Ralph did not speak, and Lord Rotherhame quietly turned away, and passing into his own room closed the door behind him.

It was an unspeakably doleful night on which to sit alone. Lord Rotherhame went downstairs at eight o'clock to snatch a hasty meal, but when that was over, and Lettice had gone upstairs to play *béziq*ue with Miss Oliver, he had no reason for delaying his return to the lonesome tower in which his sick son lay. He did not go into Ralph's room oftener than was necessary, but sat by himself in the Wardrobe Room, where Parsons had lighted the fire before retiring for the night.

Drawing an arm-chair from the high-backed

central circle, he drew it to the hearth, and sat down with his back turned to the portrait of his grandfather, which hung beside the window. Pen in hand, he set himself to write, and the ceaseless storm that flapped against the windows, and the monotonous moaning of wind in the big chimneys, made the whole a mournful accompaniment to his musings. Except for the deadened uproar of Nature's windy tumult, the room lay in profound silence, the heavy oak door at the bottom of the stairs shut out all sound of life, the only other occupant of the tower lay still as death in the adjoining room, and on the other side of the wall by which he sat were the ruins of what were once warm and sheltered chambers, now the prey of night and weather, into whose dank, moss-grown corners the moon's cold eye continually looked down. Yet, quiet as was the room, to him it seemed full of restlessness; empty, to his fancy it teemed with spiritual presences, too fine for his senses to detect. Lonely, inasmuch as none of his kind were about him, he yet could scarcely divest himself of the feeling that he was not alone. Sometimes this curious impression would seem to him accounted for by the fact that the last Earl's picture was close to him. Seldom did he behold those cold, inscrutable eyes without an undefined sinking of the heart, and now, though he had purposely *turned away* his face from it, the picture

seemed ever within his mental vision. Do what he would—write, read, turn his mind to perplexing mental problems, or busy himself in accounts—that face was still before him with its dread, familiar look of mournful, passionless resolve. He wondered at the persistency with which this melancholy influence haunted him. His nerves must be strangely overwrought, else why should he sit in breathless expectation that the silent clocks would begin one by one to tick, ready almost to swear at last that he had seen one rusty long dumb tongue move with solemn motion, as though it would trace upon the dial of Eternity the quick ebb of the tiny streamlet, Time. Troubled at the fantastic forms into which imagination was shaping itself, he felt that in order to recover his due mental balance, he must in some way break the spell of human silence, and remind the uncanny spirits of the night that a child of man, the natural lord of earth and its inhabitants, was in possession of the place before them. He rose and paced up and down, and his steps echoed loudly in what was after all but the blank silence of the building. Suddenly a cold chill crept through his blood, and a kind of dizziness obscured his senses. He beheld before him his grandfather's face, standing out in clear relief against a dark background of shadow—not old and grey as in the portrait—but younger, handsomer, and wearing on it to the life *that hard, evil look which no*



painted canvas could convey, and which, though he had seen it but once in early childhood, had burnt itself indelibly into the chambers of his brain. The face was white too, as then, and the rigid curves about the lips gave it a deathly aspect. He stood gazing as if fascinated, then suddenly discovered that he was before the mirror, and stood face to face with no other than himself.

Lord Rotherhame laughed aloud when he discovered his illusion, and then regretted that he had laughed; the sound seemed so unnatural at that hour and in that place, and died away before such an unresponsive blank of sympathy. But somehow the discovery of his mistake did not reassure him as it ought to have done. He pondered unwillingly on the new character which that accidental peep into the secret-telling mirror had given to himself. His grandfather's look had been on it—the look of the man whose unjust sternness had been the ruin of his motherless child—and it was little wonder that he had failed to recognise it as his own. Dropping his pen mechanically on his account-book, he meditated on what he had beheld, and the dead years of the Past rose again to ghost-like life, and it seemed to him as if he were his grandfather, and the sick boy lying disgraced and outcast in the adjoining room, the ill-fated Simon. Hence arose an emotion of yearning pity, and he felt almost moved to

go and tell Ralph that he was forgiven, and shame him by kindness out of his rebellion. But side by side with this softer feeling came one of bitter resentment that his child's own will should bar the way, an obstacle to peace and reconciliation such as pride could not overleap. Pride, his evil genius, forbade him to recede one inch from the position he had taken. He thrust from him with anger the weakness that made it so bitterly hard to wrench himself asunder from the son who had bartered him for such a mess of pottage as the love of a designing and plebeian girl. Fool that he was to waste regrets upon a traitor, to suffer his heart to bleed for one whose slight nature could neither comprehend nor respond to its passion, and to whom the impending separation would mean nothing deeper than a transient sadness, a vague anxiety, a nervous reluctance to part with the habits and associations of a careless childhood!

The Castle clock struck One, in a voice muffled by the tempest, which was echoed back from the ivied belfry of the church in the valley beneath. The sound moved him mournfully, for it came floating upwards from the churchyard where his wife lay, straight among the dead, to the house where she had borne her children, and by whose blazing hearths her husband sat alone. Scarcely had the vibration ceased when the door opened noiselessly, and quiet footsteps crossed the

floor. Raising his eyes, Lord Rotherhame had scarcely time to recognise Ralph in his blue flannel dressing gown, his black eyes flashing out from his small blanched face, before a letter was thrust into his hand, and uttering the words, "Read this!" in a tone unconsciously imperious, the intruder had vanished, swift and silent as he came. So rapidly was the whole action performed, that but for the substantial token left behind, Lord Rotherhame's visitor might have been a spirit. An icy look froze his face as his eye fell on the familiar handwriting. The recall from abstracted musing to present reality had been too abrupt, and a kind of perverse instinct made him wish to ignore the injunction so curtly given, and return Ralph's communication unread. Some minutes passed before he could bring himself to open it, and he locked the door first, that he might endure its possible insolence secure from intrusion.

"MY FATHER"—thus ran the words his eyes encountered—"I cannot, I dare not let you drive me from you. That you ever seriously contemplated such an action was to me an idea impossible to entertain; I could not take it in! Nothing but your assurance to-night could have brought me to believe it. They say when people are about to die their early years come back to them in freshness, *and so now the life returns to me in which*

casual words and deeds of yours led me to suppose I was—since our mother left us—the being nearest to your heart on earth. I am lost in astonishment that you should find it possible to part with me. One explanation, almost unbelievable, has suggested itself to me of late ; it is that you have never really loved me after all. If, however, this is not the true one—if I was, in truth, as dear to you as I once fondly hoped—then I can understand how black my fault must, from your point of view, have appeared—one, in fact, of those heinous faults which gnaw at the very root of love. To me, on the other hand, blinded perhaps by prejudice, by conceited feeling, and the fear of preferring happiness to honour, disobedience seemed the only course permissible, the simplest duty. To-night, a new light breaks in upon me, and I begin to think it possible that I was wrong after all to set you at defiance. And thus, since you will accept no lesser sacrifice, I nerve myself to renounce what is more precious than any personal good, the happiness of another, and my honour in her eyes. I consent to sign your letter, and I give up my engagement. Will this satisfy you? Will it in any degree atone for my long resistance? Can you restore me to the rights of sonship, and shall I be able to live on at home, and try to win back your heart which I have alienated?

*“At such a time as this, it seems right that*

I should be absolutely candid, and, therefore, I own to you that I cannot think you have been either merciful or just in your treatment of me, and that there have been times when I felt almost as if I hated, or worse, despised you.

“Forgive me, my father, and believe that I do love you still.

“RALPH.”

If, at first, a softening gleam did touch Lord Rotherhame's eyes as he received the intimation of a submission so unexpected, it vanished when he came to the closing sentences of his son's letter. This insulting confession, made in all simplicity, was a sting that inflamed his inward wound to fever-heat. A look of exultation, which had something unholy in its fierce triumph, quickly succeeded to his thrill of anger, and no sooner did he realize that he had it in his power to keep Ralph with him, than all feeling of remorseful kindness seemed to wither up and die.

It was a prize, which, eagerly desired, lost all its charm on being attained. The tragic element had gone from his dealings with his son. Ralph was no longer the banished outcast, who, by an unfilial crime, had cut himself off from his father's house, but a refractory young fool, who, after a long course of insolent defiance, had knuckled under, and was prepared to kiss the rod. A

vengeful longing seized Lord Rotherhame to abase, to crush, his penitent, and thus indemnify himself for every pang and humiliation which he had made him suffer. It pleased him to keep Ralph quivering in all the horrors of suspense, and it was near two o'clock before he repaired to his room, wearing upon his face the air of a master to a slave.

Ralph was sitting up in bed. The long tension had overstrained his nerves, and excitement burned in his cheeks and wide-open, sparkling eyes. He was wound up to fever-pitch, while his father, so icily indifferent was his manner, seemed on the verge of freezing.

"So you're tired of playing the tragedy-hero at last, my friend! I am glad to hear it, for I have been sufficiently sickened with the amount of conscience-twaddle with which you have lately dosed me."

Berkeley shivered, as if cold water had been dashed upon him.

"I have had enough of waiting on you, too," resumed his father, dropping languidly upon the sofa. "Since you are able to walk into the next room on your own errands, it will not hurt you to exert yourself on mine. Get out of bed, and hunt in the cabinet for a letter in my handwriting addressed to Mr. Bradshaw, the duplicate of the one you were civil enough to tear up. Put on your dressing-gown. I wish to pay no more doctor's bills."

Ralph complied as one in a trance, trembling the while with physical weakness and mental agitation. The letter was easily found, and he brought and held it out to his father. Lord Rotherhame made an imperious motion, "Sign it!" he said, and Ralph obeyed.

"Go back to bed!"

He went, and his father instantly tore the letter across, and flung the fragments in the fire—

"You wooden-headed young fool!" he said, contemptuously, "that is what I would have done weeks ago had you but obeyed my orders. What do I want, do you suppose, stupid boy, with a formal sanction of any act of mine from *you*, who are no better than an over-grown baby? Your engagement—as you called it—with your tutor's daughter, was broken off by the next post after you had confided it to me. This signing, about which so much ado has been made, was a simple test to prove what metal you were of, whether you were in any way the kind of son of whom a man might feel proud. You failed to stand my test, and by your insensate stubbornness have made me see that your will lacks firmness, your perception delicacy, and your heart natural affection. I don't think you meant harm—you are not clever enough for that—and you have been pampering your brain with love stories and inane sensation-novels for months past. I *am not unwilling* to spare you the disgrace

of banishment if you can assure me that you have learnt your lesson thoroughly, and that for the future I shall find you promptly obedient. But how can I be sure of this?"

Ralph's eyes had literally flashed fire at his father's galling speech, which seemed, indeed cruel payment for the sacrifice which, to his fastidious sense of honour, had been so humiliating and so terrible. But he reflected that did he fail to stand this first ordeal, he might never recover ground in his father's favour, and with strong effort controlled himself, and answered sternly—

"Try me; put me to any test you please."

"If I do, it will be a good sharp one—that I promise you! I have no idea of making home a Capua to you, *mon ami*, during your probation. I am not so variable as you young people, and do not find it so easy to leap from one extreme of feeling to another. If you wish to get your lost place back, you must win it for yourself by a long period of inoffensiveness. Remain here, therefore, only if you are prepared to face a sharp ordeal."

"I accept your terms," returned Berkeley, in a low, calm tone.

"Good! We understand each other now, and so good-bye, and *au revoir*!"

He closed the door without once looking at his son, and did not see how he writhed. But although no eye was near to mark him, Ralph was not long in suppressing outward



emotion. When his father was out of sight, he took from his finger the small gold ring Caroline had given him, and flung it into the fire, and then, turning on his side, accepted the inevitable with proud stoicism. Shame and misery wrung up one burning tear from the depths of his "slave's heart," as he termed it in his bitterness—it fell upon his pillow, and that was all.

## CHAPTER IV.

Misery acquaints a man with strange bed-fellows.  
SHAKESPEARE.

WHILE this scene was passing within the Castle walls, Henry Middleton stood lost in silent thought before the lattice-window of the little attic bedroom to which his host had conducted him. The evening's conversation had thrown but little light on the subject which engrossed his mind. Between the dread of arousing Mrs. Weedon's suspicions, and the difficulty of nailing her to the point, he had been able to obtain scarcely any useful information. Communicative and candid as she seemed, she had never once, either by involuntary mistake or appearance of confusion, let slip anything that could give colour to the dark doubts that he entertained about her, and she finally became so garrulous in her long-winded stories of by-gone days that Middleton was not sorry when she discovered that her bed-time was passed, and rose to say good-night.

She toiled upstairs tottering with sleepiness, and Ted Weedon, turning to his companion, met his blank disappointed gaze with a leering smile, and a facetious—

"Well, mister, hope you've enjoyed the h'old lady's tales?"

"What is your own impression about her, Mr. Weedon, may I ask?"

"My impression! Whoy, that she knows no more about this business of yours than the babe unborn. Guilty people starts or colours up when they fears they're going to get into trouble, and my mother, why she took it as cool as a coocumber, let alone blubberin' when you told her of your last talk with Chawles."

"Crocodile's tears! If you want my opinion now, it is that your mother is an uncommonly clever woman, so clever that you and I have no chance in pitting our wits against hers. But she knows the secret, otherwise she would not have slipped away from all crucial points in the way she did. What is to be done? As far as she's concerned, we seem to have come to a dead lock."

"Try her drunk!" suggested Weedon, with a grin. "Liquor oils the rustiest tongue, as the sayin' is."

"I don't feel justified in that," said Middleton, with evident regret. "It is not permissible to tempt a fellow-creature to do evil, though it were to serve the best purpose."

"Bless us and save us! There ain't no need of *tempting* of her. I've seen mother, now, as drunk as a lord—not often, I grant you—and his Lordship knows nothin' about it, though he must be precious green not to

see that in her old age she's growin' fonder and fonder of the bottle every day."

"Well, well, make whatever use you can of such opportunities as arise. You need endanger yourself in nothing, and every item of information you bring shall be well paid for."

"Je-rusalem!" grunted the policeman, after a few minutes' further discussion, as he kicked the ashes together on the hearth, "how they old boards on the stairs do crack to-night. We shall be having the rickety old place about our ears one of these days, if we don't look out."

"It is a rough night, as you say, and the stairs do crack in a most disturbing manner. Do you mind shutting the staircase door? Our smoke will not then penetrate to your mother's room, and we need not fear to disturb her by speaking loud."

Weedon complied. He was so pre-occupied, that his senses—never particularly acute—detected nothing in the creaking stairs as he approached them but the effect of the wind, that seemed to shake the old house to its foundations. Neither did he see what Mr. Middleton had seen, the apparition of a hooked nose and two sharp black eyes through the crevice in the door.

Henry Middleton was in no way discomposed. He had heard each soft heavy foot-step with which his hostess had crept downstairs, and had marked the exact moment of her arriving within earshot.

All Mrs. Weedon had succeeded in over-hearing of her strange guest's conversation was his observation on the weather, and now, although a stout door stood between them, Middleton cautiously dropped his voice yet lower, and the old woman's devouring curiosity to find out what topic kept the two men in conference till after midnight had to remain unsatisfied.

Before returning to his room, Henry Middleton asked leave to look for a moment on the face of his sister's child. He had forborne to press Mrs. Weedon on the point when, on the introduction of the subject during the evening, he had found her indisposed to encourage him, but now that she was gone, curiosity forbade him to rest without once seeing her for whom he was to attempt so great a venture. He communicated his intention to the policeman, who forthwith opened the front door and led the way into the soaking garden.

The dim outline of trees was faintly discernible—the huge branches swaying and tossing in the tempest—and Middleton was pretty near wetted to the skin as he pushed his way after Weedon through a gap in the high box hedge that divided the neighbours' gardens. Sally's front door was easily opened by the simple expedient of Weedon's wedging his hand through a hole where the handle had been, and slipping back the rusty bolt *from the inside*. He struck a light, and

Middleton found himself in the dirty and dismal kitchen of the crazy woman—a doleful contrast, indeed, to the snug room he had left—and which seemed to bear no trace of human interest, taste or care.

“What is your neighbour’s name? She does not seem to care much about appearances,” he remarked, glancing round him with an air of disgust.

“Bless us and save us! I had clean forgotten you didn’t know whose house it was! Mrs. Tibbetts and mother has been neighbours for years, and a right good neighbour she was to us, too, poor woman, before her troubles come.”

“Tibbetts! Not the mother of the murderer, surely?”

“Worse than that; his wife, sir! She was a clean tidy little body, was Sally, in times past, but he give her such a turn that night he done the deed, coming in on her all over blood, and wantin’ her to hide him, that she’s never been the same creetur since.”

“And you let this poor child sleep with the wife of her father’s murderer, and on his very pillows? It’s enough to make one sick to think of it.”

“Where’s the harm, Mr. Middleton? Sall’s never done nobody an ill turn, and she’s took a fancy to the maid. Tain’t law to punish a poor lone ’ooman for her husband’s fault—at least, tain’t British law.”

*Middleton said no more, all his attention*

being given to ascertaining which rungs of the ladder that supplemented the broken staircase were strong enough to bear his weight. The ascent accomplished, he found himself in a bare low garret, whose white-washed walls were blackened with dirt and cobwebs, and through whose roof the rain was dripping into a pool upon the floor. The wind found ready ingress through a broken pane inadequately stopped with rags, and the rotten boards trembled under the weight of the two men.

It struck Middleton as strange that a reputedly benevolent landlord should permit such a wretched tumble-down tenement to disgrace his property; but the policeman explained the mystery by whispering to him that "the place was Sally's own," this part of the house having been given to her for life by the late Countess, and that the old crone obstinately refused to admit workmen or village people within her precincts.

Taking the light from his companion's hand, and moving softly not to disturb the sleepers, Middleton approached the low truckle-bed with its faded patchwork quilt. Its two occupants slept soundly. He bent down, looked on their unconscious faces, and started back with something like a cry. A flower-like child's face, on whose fair cheeks the dark lashes rested peacefully, and whose temples were shaded by a golden cloud, lay close to an imbecile and ragged visage, whose

sunken eyes and open mouth seemed to belong almost to a corpse. It was like finding a kingfisher in a mud-bank, a moss rose-bud shooting up by a dust heap.

But after the first shock of the contrast, Middleton forgot the unlovely countenance on the further pillow, forgot the rank and great prospects of the small creature whose champion he had constituted himself, and sought alone in her little features for a remembrance of her dead father, a look of the familiar face which had long since mouldered into dust. Recollections, many and overpowering, came flooding back upon him of the companion whom a sudden and dreadful death had snatched from his sight; of the wild, merry days they had lived through together, of his chivalrous sympathy with the unfortunate, of the hopes he had cherished of a day when he should himself take his part in mending their wrongs, of his failings, which appealing to his friend's instincts of generosity, had but drawn them closer together. With an intensified longing to serve the dead in the person of the living, Middleton fixed a yet more searching scrutiny on Dolly's face. Weedon, too, was regarding her with an attentive gaze, and this his first critical survey of her straight aquiline nose, her fine lips, whose curves had in them something of command, struck even his dull fancy with a shock of surprise. This was, surely, no daughter of the people, but one born of a



long line of ancestors, whom circumstances had not driven to perform menial services, to flatter or to cringe!

"How she clung to me when her father tried to take her from my arms to carry her into the ship!" murmured Middleton, as with a sigh he turned away. "Stay, Weedon, let us take her with us now. I cannot leave her with that repulsive hag!"

"You can do as you please, sir," returned Weedon, with an aggrieved air, "but you must please explain to mother that you take a special h'interest in the gal. She'll know as I've never made no bones about her sleepin' with Sall before, and that it won't be my doin' now."

"What would be more likely than that I should feel some concern for my own sister's child? You know, it was a narrow shave that she was not left my ward, and I wish she had been, for my sister, Mrs. Bradshaw, has never cared about her. But no matter, it may be as well to keep clear of everything that could excite remark. Only lay this to heart, Weedon. It will be strictly to your own advantage to attach that sweet child to you, and to do your best to make her comfortable."

So at last the new comer was left alone in his sleeping-room, and long, long did he stand in anxious thought before the window. More than any other object in the dark world *without the panes*, that solitary light, a

hundred yards off—the light, which sometimes whirling rain and swinging boughs hid from sight, and which he knew shone from the great unseen castle of the Harolds—fascinated his gaze. Would his puny efforts in a dead man's cause be as powerless against successful wrong as were those strong winds and waters against the feudal towers whose walls, eight feet thick, held the usurper with his guilty secret? Well, fail he might, as others had failed before him; but let him at least make the attempt! and with untiring perseverance, a good heart, and a cry to the God of the fatherless, it, surely, need not be made in despair.

## CHAPTER V.

I will instruct my sorrows to be proud.

SHAKESPEARE.

It was one o'clock on a cold day in February, and Ralph with unwilling steps was creeping forth from the warm quiet room which, for the past month, had given him sanctuary. An indescribable repugnance to the effort of recommencing family-life under its changed auspices oppressed him, and he turned on the threshold and wistfully looked back. It was the first time he had had all his clothes on, and the fingers that had been tying the blue silk knot at his neck were weak and stiff with cold. He had grown to have a cat-like attachment to his peaceful quarters in Little John's Tower, where the sole disagreeable break in his seclusion had been an occasional brief visit from his father, where he had had to face only the kindly eyes of his nurse and doctor, where he had had books in plenty, and been able to brood undisturbed in his easy chair by the hearth. The declaration that he was convalescent, and might safely mix with the family again, had sounded in his ears like a trump of doom, and a sickly smile was the only answer he had given to the congratulatory pat on the back with *which* Dr. Pyke accompanied his permission

to "dress and go downstairs to lunch to-morrow."

"I'll never more break a snail-shell," he thought, remorsefully, as he descended, "though I don't think any snail could hate the cold outside world as I hate the family luncheon party! I shall not add much to the general hilarity—I have forgotten how to talk, and when I try to laugh feel the corners of my lips go down like a baby's who is about to howl."

A rough east wind was blowing, and its breath, coming in through the open staircase window, seemed literally barbed with ice.

The sun was shining, it seemed to Berkeley simply for the ill-natured purpose of putting out the fires, which lay brown and dead beneath its heatless rays. He glanced out of the window, and the white world, buried as far as sight could reach in unsympathetic glaring snow, made his eyes ache. He looked up wistfully to the other world, the Immensity above, a great dome of pale, medicated blue, from whose vast height huge white and purple clouds continually sent down storms of cold hail and rain. Life must wear a harsh aspect under such auspices. The soul of man, destined for a gentler clime and brighter sphere, opens out, as do the flowers, beneath balmy airs and genial skies, but the east wind—symbol of harsh, unlovely sin—kills the *tender shoots*, and makes imagina-

tion and faith alike turn pale. To Ralph, repulsed by the bare, staring aspect of earth, the banks of piled-up cloud and big blue halls above offered no relief, and Heaven seemed but a second earth, its eternity endowing it with an added element of unpleasantness. Having no particular reason however to turn away, he stood longer at the open casement than Mrs. Weedon would have deemed expedient for her patient so lately convalescent, and gazed forth wistfully through the bars, like a singing bird pining in its cage. His illness had made him grow, his bloom had faded, and his clothes hung loosely about his tall, slight form.

The family had already for some minutes been settled at luncheon, and Ralph, with a sudden, self-contemptuous start, turned and went down quickly to face the dreaded ordeal. Since he was bound sooner or later to re-enter the home-life which his father had pledged himself to make a bondage to him, it was childish folly to shrink from the first plunge. Experience had already taught him, as it teaches all who have a mind to learn, too much pride or too much common-sense to kick at the inevitable, but possibly his somewhat scornful stoicism was unconsciously a little supported by that innermost faith that sooner or later his skies must brighten, which dies so hard in those who are fresh to trouble. Crushing down all inward shrinkings he walked firmly towards

the Dining Room, and in another moment was in the presence of the familiar circle, father, brother, sisters, chaplain and governess. In the ordinary course of events he would the next instant have been well-nigh smothered by sisterly hugs and kisses, but—could it be that they had not observed his entrance? they all sat mute and motionless, and no one so much as rose to hold out a hand in greeting. Surely they could not have observed him, it was not thus that they would receive him back after his six weeks of illness! But when, turning cold all over with a vague sense of change and disappointment, he came forward and stood awkwardly in the vacant place at the table, he found that beyond all doubt this chill reception was intentional, for amid the dead silence, his sisters looked up at him with startled glances of solemnity and wonder.

Something there was about this frigid silent greeting from those to whose demonstrations of eager affection he was used as to air and water, which brought the tears with a sudden blinding rush to his eyes. When the frame is enfeebled by illness, it is hard to repress physical emotion. But driving back the untoward drops with fierce despite, Ralph stood, biting his lips and bending his eyes, erect among his awe-stricken sisters. Suddenly one of the party rose, and coming round the table, took his cold, limp hand with a warm grasp. It was Mr. Daubeney,

and had not his eyes been so suffused that he dared not lift them, Ralph would have seen a red flush of indignation on the Chaplain's face.

"I am right glad to see you down at last, my dear Ralph," he said, with marked cordiality, "your absence has thrown a gloom over us all."

For the moment Berkeley could almost have wished the kind words unspoken, they caused such a dangerous swelling in his throat. He was struggling to compose his voice to answer, when his father's icy tone saved him the need of further effort, freezing the suffusion of his eyes, and restoring steadiness to his trembling hand.

"Your illness has made you forgetful of your manners, I think, Berkeley; why do you not come to wish me good morning?"

Lord Rotherhame stared haughtily at the Chaplain as he spoke, and when his son, with a coldly polite "I beg your pardon," came towards him, held out a hand which chilled Berkeley to the marrow.

"Speak to your sisters, and Miss Oliver, and then begin your luncheon. You are very late."

Possibly Lord Rotherhame intended this hard greeting rather as a punishment to Mr. Daubeny than to his fallen favourite. To Berkeley, however, it appeared as the first drop of the cup he had undertaken to drink as the price of restoration to his family, and he

took it in uncomplaining silence, as he would have taken a draught of bitter medicine.

When luncheon was over, Mr. Daubeny, seeing that Ralph was at a loss how to dispose of himself, told him that he was welcome in his study if he would care to come and sit with him while he wrote his sermon. Ralph accepted gladly, and was following him from the room, when his father turned sharply on them from the window in which he was standing.

"Thanks, Daubeny, but Berkeley has been idle so long that he can afford to lose no more time. I am on the look out for a tutor to read with him, and till one is found I must give him enough work to keep his wits from rusting. I want to see whether you have any notion of what real work is," he added to Ralph. "Come into the library. I have told Parsons to bring down your books."

Mr. Daubeny would have offered to tutorise the future Oxonian himself, had he not felt keenly that he had too openly arrayed himself on his side to make the suggestion with any chance of success. He was turning sadly away, when a footman entering approached Lord Rotherhame with hushed step, and in a reverently-lowered voice informed him that a lady and gentleman were in the Cedar Drawing Room, waiting to see his Lordship on important business.

"A lady on business?" repeated his master; "what name did she give?"



"The gentleman said he was sorry he had forgotten to bring his card, my Lord. I think the name was Bradshaw—Mr. and Miss Bradshaw."

Berkeley's heart gave one great bound, and involuntarily he glanced towards his father. Lord Rotherhame smiled with galling indifference.

"Say I will join Mr. Bradshaw in five minutes," he replied, "and meanwhile you, sir, shall have something to amuse yourself with. I wish to see how much you can get through in a given time, so sit in my study where you can be *alone* and have nothing to distract your attention."

The word "*alone*" had a defiant ring, and finishing by a final determined glance the war of looks that had been waging between Mr. Daubeny and himself, Lord Rotherhame disappeared, followed by Ralph, whose lips were closed with an expression of resolute endurance.

Words cannot express the consternation into which the family at Deerhurst Rectory had been thrown by the missive that had reached them two days after Berkeley's return to Rotherhame, the missive in which Lord Rotherhame had politely but most decidedly declined the honour of any matrimonial connection with the house of Bradshaw, and concluded with the announcement of his son's removal from Mr. Bradshaw's *care*. The suggestion that that gentleman

had scarcely fulfilled the duties of his responsible position when he allowed his pupil to contract a clandestine engagement with his daughter, pierced the tutorial heart none the less sharply that it was couched in the delicate language of good breeding, and Mr. Bradshaw, following the example of his father, Adam, had assailed with bitter reproaches his help-meet, to whom he declared he should probably owe the loss of all reputation among the parents of eligible youths. For what confidence could be placed in the advertisement which assured the anxious pater-familias that the "Rev. Christopher Bradshaw's pupils received the benefits of a high classic education, combined with the comforts of home and the discipline of school," should the circumstances under which the Earl of Rotherhame had removed his son and heir become generally known?

Mrs. Bradshaw, wiser in her generation than that child of light her husband, had defended herself by carrying the war into her accuser's quarters, and had loudly reproached him for his tameness of spirit in succumbing without an effort before Lord Rotherhame's rebuff. Feeling in all its poignancy what would be the humiliation of making known Caroline's discomfiture to that world of Deerhurst, which had witnessed her open elation during her short period of triumph, Mrs. Bradshaw had determined that the prize *should not be* renounced without a

struggle. She had plied her dejected and self-accusing spouse day by day with argument, entreaty, reproach, and sarcasm, and had worked persistently on Caroline's feelings of disappointed ambition, till the young lady had become finally so overwrought and hysterical, so fastidious in her appetite, and consequently so expensive to maintain, that her oppressed step-father had been at last worked up to the required pitch of enthusiasm, and it had been arranged that he should take advantage of a timely bronchial attack to desert for a few days his lately re-assembled pupils, and proceed with Caroline in person to St. Dunstan's. Mrs. Bradshaw had seen plainly that no amount of judiciously conciliatory letters would have any effect upon Lord Rotherhame's purpose. Berkeley's blank silence in answer to the many urgent appeals poured in upon him by Caroline, asking for but one line in answer, had shown that his father was terribly in earnest, and that argument or entreaty would but harden him the more. On the other hand Caroline echoed her mother's confidently expressed belief that her lover was himself at heart "as true as steel." She had his word of honour, and had he by any dire stress of circumstance been prevailed on to break it, he would without doubt have confessed it to her in a strain of fervid apology. Could she but go in person, and ask her Planty of his father, what wonders might she not effect! She

would obtain an interview with her lover, by the spell of her presence reanimate his failing constancy. Together, hand in hand, they would lay siege to his father, and what heart that ever beat in manly breast could long withstand the softening influence of tears on the cheek of a lovely girl? Caroline studied her face in the glass—the fair forehead overshadowed by clusters of carefully trained curls, the little coquettish mouth and nose, the delicate pink and white cheeks, the dainty neck in its lace and muslin ruffles. She was in truth pretty enough to do justice to her bold undertaking, and even Mr. Bradshaw, though more dubious of success than the ladies of his family, could scarcely bring himself to believe that Lord Rotherhame could have the heart rudely to reject to her very face a daughter-in-law so fascinating. So swallowing his natural distaste with as good a grace as might be, and even assisting to stifle the occasional whispers of natural modesty that arose in the young lady's bosom, Mr. Bradshaw bade farewell to his wife, and took two second-class tickets to St. Dunstan's.

Has Dame Nature a special spite against those children of men who have no eyes or ears for her stern pure teachings? However that may be, certain it is that on this day—the most crucial, the most hazardous, the most bewilderingly decisive and exciting that had ever risen on Caroline's life—that severe

monitress sent a cutting wind to disarrange the trembling damsel's fringe and ringlets, to part the fair locks from the stuffing that eked them out, to roughen her soft skin, and bring a disfiguring redness to her nose and eyelids. Not all the consciousness that she wore gloves buttoned to the elbow, a dark blue silk and cashmere dress of Parisian taste, the thinnest boots and the biggest feather imaginable, could sustain Miss Bradshaw under the depressing influence of these effects of adverse weather, and her spirits sank to zero when at length the solemn feudal Castle rose before her view, with its cannon-branded Keep in whose wide fissures thick ivy and yellow lichens were softly creeping. Neither she nor her step-father spoke, as driving up the graceful beech avenue, followed by the shy eyes of deer herding on either hand, and crossing the moat, they ascended to the Castle courtyard. Possibly both in secret were repenting their bold determination, and Mr. Bradshaw wishing himself back in his snug study, correcting the blotted themes of his young gentlemen. The flyman jumping off the box, pulled the bell, and the next moment the door opened, and Caroline, with mingling sensations of awe and exultation, discerned behind the portly form of the butler an intoxicating vision of crimson and white footmen, in whose silk stockings and powdered heads she herself could have suggested no

improvement. With trembling rapture the thought awoke within her—

“Can it be that I shall one day be crossing this threshold as those footmen’s noble mistress?”

“Is Lord Rotherhame at home?” enquired Mr. Bradshaw; and Caroline, in nervous trepidation, felt almost sorry when the butler answered that he was. A great desire for “Planty” seized her—a longing in that place where all was strange and awful to enjoy, the countenance of one familiar presence. She whispered to her father to ask for him, but Mr. Bradshaw, shaking his head, reminded her of the urgent importance of avoiding everything that might foster prejudice, and descending, helped her to alight. Caroline looked anxiously about her as she passed up the stone stairs, and along the old galleries between a double file of impassive portraits, hoping every moment to catch a glimpse of her boy-lover’s curly head. But no such luck befell her, and she was fain to console herself with the reflection that, “thanks to Planty,” she was furnished with many useful hints as to his father’s idiosyncracies, which might direct her how most politically to approach him. Conspicuous among these stood out the remembrance of a certain conversation in which she had been instructed that Lord Rotherhame’s character had a tendency towards romance, and, deter-

mining to attack him on this vulnerable side, she prepared battering-rams of heroic pride and noble indignation, and secret mines of tearful, despairing sentiment which, combined, she hoped might bring down the citadel of opposition in ruins about her ears.

The footman deposited the visitors in the Cedar Drawing Room. A huge bloodhound rose, as they entered, from his couch before the fire, eyed them churlishly, and uttering a low growl, walked slowly from the room. It seemed an ominous greeting to Caroline's anxious fancy, but Mr. Bradshaw looked on the bright side of things, and expressed his unfeigned pleasure that "that very uncomfortable-looking animal had relieved them of his presence."

"A fine old room, my love," he added, lifting his coat-tails nervously as he seated himself in a quaint tapestried chair, and glanced around, with shiny boots extended, "though not so spacious as one might have expected from the general scale of the mansion. I suppose that in olden times our ancestors did not much trouble themselves about apartments of ceremony."

"Planty told me that the Banqueting Hall and the Red Drawing Room were the biggest rooms in the Castle," said Caroline, pressing her hands on her beating heart with an effort to appear unconstrained, "and that they used the Banqueting Hall sometimes as a ball-room."

"Ah indeed! Look at all the coats-of-arms in that niche, Carl!" and he turned his thumb upwards to the painted roof of the window recess, brightly emblazoned with the arms of the various families with whom the Harolds had intermarried: Plantagenets, Perceys, De Veres and Nevilles, in whose centre the White Leopard of the Earls of Rotherhame was united with the Rose of the House of Stuart.

Caroline, looking up, tried to picture to herself the Bradshaw crest beneath—a mongrel-looking animal, species unknown, but more resembling a lamb-rampant than any other created being, which had been devised by her paternal grandparent, the very dentist who, in Berkeley's infantile days, had provoked Lord Rotherhame's ire by pulling out good teeth from the jaws of his unlucky little patient. Carrie sighed, and drawing nearer to the fire, attempted by aid of the mirror to put herself straight, and coax her strayed locks into order. Returning warmth helped by degrees to reanimate her courage, and soaring high on the gossamer wings of romantic fancy, she had mentally weighed the opposing merits of such magnificent phrases as: "You forget yourself, sir!" and "Insolent creature, remember that you address a lady!" and was already in Planty's arms—Lord Rotherhame's vain effort at resistance having melted into tender compliance—when a *step without* recalled her with a



shock to the present. Her first impression of the quiet, well-bred looking man who met her anxious eye, was so different to the picture formed by her fancy, that all her elaborately formed schemes collapsed, and feeling more foolish, frightened, and uncomfortable, than she had ever felt before, she remained staring in motionless silence.

"Mr. Bradshaw of Deerhurst, I presume?" said Lord Rotherhame, bowing slightly, and measuring the young lady with a comprehensive glance. "Will you sit down?"

Mr. Bradshaw sank back on his chair without a word, and looked hopelessly around. At the crucial moment all ideas seemed to desert him; he opened his mouth once or twice, and finally reclosed it without having emitted a sound.

"You are staying in the neighbourhood, Mr. Bradshaw?" said Lord Rotherhame, feeling himself at last called upon to break the embarrassing silence.

"Scarcely that, my Lord," rousing himself, and speaking in a tone of elaborate agreeability. "Permit me, *en passant*, to introduce to you my daughter, Miss Caroline Bradshaw. Scarcely *staying* in the neighbourhood. We are birds of passage, flitting on from place to place. I have of late been suffering from—ahem—from—severe cold, resulting in an affection of the bronchial tubes, and my wife has induced me to take a little *holiday*."

"Don't you think that travelling in winter is more likely to cause bronchitis than to cure it?" enquired Lord Rotherhame, with perfect seriousness.

"Papa is safer anywhere than at home," put in Caroline, feeling speech less alarming than protracted silence, and judging it politic to let her Planty's father see that she had it in her to be a good daughter. "Travelling, he is more tractable, and I can be after him every moment, and there are no stuffy cottages for him to be in and out of. We think of going on to-morrow to some old friends about twelve miles from here—General Sir Charles and Lady Rawlins of Fleet Court. Do you happen to know them at all?"

"Not in the least, no! I lead a rather hermit life when I get into the country, and see but little of my neighbours."

"O, how delightful!" cried Carry with enthusiasm, "that is just the sort of life I relish. Solitude with birds and flowers for out of doors, and in the house, books, poetry and music. It sounds quite too lovely!" and she clasped her hands together in childish ecstasy.

"I envy you, Miss Bradshaw. With such simple tastes you will easily find happiness."

"Do you think it so easy to be happy?" returned Caroline, relapsing for the moment into a fitful melancholy, and then apparently making an effort to rouse herself she added,

as by a natural sequence of ideas—"May I ask, how is Planty?"

"Planty! I don't know anyone of that name," said Lord Rotherhame with an air of reflection, and not revealing by a shade of expression that he guessed on whom Miss Bradshaw had bestowed this playful soubriquet.

Mr. Bradshaw darted a reproving glance at his daughter, and palpably turned the subject by an allusion to the fine view commanded by the windows. Lord Rotherhame, however, despairing of his friend ever coming to the point unassisted, determined to bring on the crisis.

"Yes," he said, "it is a pretty view, but I think you intimated, Mr. Bradshaw, that I could be of service to you in some way, and I fear," he added, with a glance at the clock, "that I have an engagement shortly, which must be kept."

Thus brought to book, Mr. Bradshaw, having preluded his speech by a variety of hems and coughs, at last made answer with an air of dignity, which to himself at least was wonderfully impressive.

"I must first observe then, my Lord, that I have made this long journey, and am here in your house to-day, solely on account of my dear daughter, who has been so much out of health of late as to cause serious uneasiness to her mamma and myself, and to render my *taking this step* a matter of necessity."

"How about the bronchitis on which I have been condoling with him?" thought Lord Rotherhame, but aloud he answered—"Is Miss Bradshaw also subject to bronchial affections?"

"*My dear Lord Rotherhame*"—Here his Lordship recoiled involuntarily—"you surely must be conscious that I am not now alluding to any natural infirmity in my poor girl's constitution, but to the sad state of nerves to which the worry and distress of the last six weeks have reduced her."

"Oh!" exclaimed Lord Rotherhame, as if a new light had flashed upon him, and a slight smile hovered upon his lips, "I see, Mr. Bradshaw, you are alluding to that affair of my boy's, about which you sent me a letter—or message—at Christmas. I wrote to you by the next post, if I remember right; you had the letter, I suppose?"

"I did," returned Mr. Bradshaw, firmly. "But excuse me, I cannot suffer the matter to rest there, and I would prefer discussing it *vivâ voce* rather than by letter."

"Possibly Miss Bradshaw may like to see the pictures; young ladies do not generally care for business," and Lord Rotherhame rose as if to ring the bell.

"Thank you," murmured Caroline, with a suppressed sob, "but I could not bear to be absent while my darling's fate hangs in the balance."

"Since *that is your decision*," he returned,

with a look of thinly-veiled ill-will, "you will forgive me, I hope, if I speak plainly with your father. And yet I do not know that there remains anything for me to say," he added, turning haughtily to Mr. Bradshaw, "since I have already assured you of my regret at my son's folly. I might, however, remind you once more that all the annoyance he caused would have been spared, had you thought fit from the first to take his father into your confidence."

"You must recollect, if you please," returned Mr. Bradshaw, colouring up, "that I knew nothing of the matter till it had already reached a very advanced stage. Certainly I should never have given my sanction to any pupil of mine making matrimonial proposals without the full knowledge and consent of his parents. But when I found, after much serious talk with both, that matters had gone too far to be summarily disposed of, that the young people were thoroughly in earnest, and that they were willing to undergo the test of long waiting, I certainly could not feel myself justified—pained and surprised though I was at the concealment practised on me—in opposing the will of Divine Providence, which had so visibly been drawing their young hearts together."

"Your pain at your daughter's want of openness," said Lord Rotherhame, suppressing a movement of contemptuous indignation,

“might, I should have thought, have suggested to you the expediency of sparing the father of your charge a similar distress. Instead of which, I was kept in the dark for six whole weeks, during which time my son was introduced to your friends far and wide as your future son-in-law. If I enter on this theme, I may perhaps be drawn into saying more than I should wish to say, or you would care to hear. Let me therefore simply ask whether you have anything more that you wish to communicate? The letter I sent you would, I hoped, have closed the subject.”

“This much more I have to say, Lord Rotherhame, that considering the very warm protestations made use of by your son to my poor girl, the love—I may say the devotion—shown in his every word and look—I cannot bring myself to believe that an honourable youth, such as I have always considered Berkeley to be, *could* have sanctioned such a communication as you forwarded to me, nor that their separation would cause less agony to him than it does to Caroline. Apart from this, her honour is compromised, and I cannot allow the matter to rest till that is vindicated.”

“I am amazed to find you adopting this tone,” said Lord Rotherhame, steeling himself to patience, “and I really cannot see how the honour of a young lady can be seriously affected by the folly of a boy of seventeen. It is not often *that* a schoolboy is favoured

with so many opportunities of making himself ridiculous, but, though my son doubtless appreciated highly the privilege accorded him of freely enjoying this young lady's society, you can scarcely be surprised to hear that no serious feelings had been called forth. He has found out by this time that he is too young to be in love."

"No serious feelings! Then he ought to be ashamed of himself, that is all *I* can say, Lord Rotherhame! Is a young man to set himself deliberately to win the affections of an artless, confiding girl, to ask her hand, to promise fidelity under the most solemn oath, to extort her father's consent, and allow the whole matter to be made public, and then to say *he has no serious feelings!* This, my Lord, would be scandalous, were it not incredible, for I verily believe that you unintentionally wrong him, and that your poor son is more cowardly than wicked."

"Well, if you considered the matter settled without consulting me, and made it public, you were, in my opinion, a little premature," he answered, with provoking coolness. "I am really glad," he continued, in a grave tone, "to have been assured by you that it is not your practice to allow your pupils to act *wholly* without reference to their parents, or I should be under the painful necessity of warning those of my friends who have placed boys under your charge, in the confidence that

the Fifth Commandment would find some place in your code of education."

"It would indeed be a shameful thing," replied Mr. Bradshaw, his voice trembling with fear and anger, "to take away the character of a sound and faithful minister"—Lord Rotherham smiled ironically at the self-drawn portrait—"because he had been over-persuaded by your son's piteous entreaties, to keep silence only till the poor fellow should have had the opportunity of speaking to you in person."

"I should most unwillingly injure any clergyman, and am anxious to give you the benefit of all extenuating circumstances. My son has been, no doubt, indiscreet, as young gentlemen are prone to be when left to follow their own wills without let or hinderance. Since he has returned to my care, he has become, I am glad to say, quite a reformed character. I think there is nothing further to be said. Will Miss Bradshaw take any refreshment?"

And he turned politely towards the young lady.

Mr. Bradshaw now thought it high time to adopt a more conciliatory tone, and urged by an anguished look from Caroline, he gave utterance to a kind of chirp, which seemed to intimate that he was eliminating from his mind all elements of personality and rancour.

"Let us drop at once, my Lord," he said,



“the fruitless discussion of a painful matter in which, I frankly admit, with the best intentions, I may have erred in judgment, and then let me put this to you as an abstract question. A highly honourable person like yourself will, of course, admit that to the giving up of a contract made by two the consent of two is necessary. Well, here is a case in point. Our two dear children, following, too blindly perchance, the instincts of their own hearts, have entered into a solemn agreement ultimately to unite themselves in the bonds of matrimony. Now, supposing that you, the father of one of the parties, wish to put an end to the contract, your right and natural course is to seek the concurrence of that other party who is not bound by your authority. Try this course with Caroline. You may—nay, you will—probably succeed, though at no less a cost, I fear,” he added, in a lower voice, “than of a broken heart! My dear Lord Rotherhame, you and I have both been young; we have both known the blessing of sharing with loved partners our hearths and homes. Shall we—as the fabulous dog in the manger—deny to others what we have so richly ourselves enjoyed? Can you expect the blessing of Providence on your son’s future if you wantonly expose a sweet young creature whom he has wooed to the protracted anguish of a blighted life?”

Lord Rotherhame, who on seeing Mr.

Bradshaw spread forth the wings of his eloquence, had settled himself as for a Sunday's sermon, attempted no response to this last appeal; and the orator, after a short pause, burst out afresh.

"The want of means you will be the last person to urge as an objection, for you are a wealthy man, and are personally above seeking pecuniary advantages in your son's wife. Caroline is a lady born and bred, well educated, accomplished; and that man will be happy who shall call her wife! I do not ask for the marriage to take place immediately—that, I quite agree, would be highly improper. All I desire is some pledge that Berkeley will fulfil his engagement in, say five or six years. Come, my Lord," he concluded, with an expansive flourish of the hands, "what say you to this compromise?"

"That is no compromise at all, sir; and that if it were I should not accept it. My reasons I need not give, and I do not think you would care to hear them."

Mr. Bradshaw's face lengthened.

"Is the little girl Weedon, whose unfortunate connection with my good wife you have learned, any obstacle?" he faltered.

"No, I assure you," interrupted Lord Rotherhame, emphatically. "I am sorry I cannot wait on you further, Mr. Bradshaw; but if you are still dissatisfied, I can only suggest your taking legal proceedings."

Mr. Bradshaw, fully awake to the absurdity

and hopelessness of attempting to carry a breach-of-promise case against a lad under age, shook his head with a grunt of pious disapproval ; and was beginning to resign himself to the inevitable, when his daughter, who had been sedulously endeavouring to screw up her courage to the sticking point, sprang off her seat with startling abruptness, and giving free rein to the hysterical emotions which had been struggling for expression, seized Lord Rotherhame's hand and watered it with tears.

" Oh, Planty's father ! Planty's father ! " she murmured, between choking sobs ; " you cannot be so cruel as to snatch him from me ! Hear me ! I will be a daughter to you, and a sister to your children. I will love you so dearly, so dearly ; and will try to make the home happy to you all, and to become more worthy of him, my own, my noble Planty ! "

Lord Rotherhame rose quickly, horribly embarrassed at receiving these liberal offers, which he felt could scarcely be declined without a breach of courtesy.

" Pray sit down," he said, looking eagerly to Mr. Bradshaw to deliver him from his predicament ; " you are not well. Let me send for a maid and sal-volatile."

He tried to loosen his hand, but Caroline, not satisfied with sal-volatile as a substitute for her lover, held him as in a vice, and he could not escape.

" I do not let you go till you have

promised," she burst forth again, "that I may be your child. Oh, mercy ! mercy ! or my poor heart will burst ! No, no, you shall not go from me. I must have your promise first !"

"Miss Bradshaw, I am grieved to have to remind you that my son has himself renounced all pretension to the honour of your hand. Your father must surely see that it is needless for me to add a word."

"It is a cruel deception," cried Caroline, passionately. "I will, I will see Planty alone ! He knows he has given me his word, and he cannot go from it."

"Mr. Bradshaw," said Lord Rotherhame, "your regard for your daughter's dignity will prevent your sanctioning her seeking an interview when the wish is not reciprocated."

"But *is* the wish not reciprocated ?" cried Mr. Bradshaw, growing very angry. "My daughter has a perfect right to ascertain the truth from the lips of her betrothed husband himself."

"The truth, sir ? Your excitement blinds you to the fact that you are aspersing my honour ! I shall permit nothing of the kind."

And Lord Rotherhame's brow was darkened by the slight ominous frown with which the great annihilate the small.

"It is quite clear that it was a lie you told us," cried Caroline, flinging away, in an access of hysterical rage, the hand that she

had been clasping. "He *is* true to me, and that is why you are keeping us apart."

"Carrie, Carrie," remonstrated her father, "be silent, will you?"

"No, I won't!" she screamed, powerless to restrain herself. "Why shouldn't he marry me, I should like to know? It's all nasty, hateful pride; and I am as good as he is any day."

"O, undoubtedly." And Lord Rotherhame moved a step or two backwards from the incensed damsel, as though apprehensive of a personal assault. "Madam, excuse me. Mr. Bradshaw, I wish you a good evening."

"Well, my Lord," said Mr. Bradshaw, "before we part, I must say that throughout the whole of this interview, obtained by me at the cost of so much trouble and expense" (—"Does the man expect me to treat him to his holiday trip?" thought Lord Rotherhame to himself—"you have not once condescended to discuss this subject on its merits, and have certainly scarcely accorded me the consideration due to one who is a clergyman and your guest.")

"If so, I can but apologise."

And before Mr. Bradshaw had time to reply, Lord Rotherhame had left the room, and the momentous interview had become a thing of the past.

It was over, and Caroline's last hope quenched. Nothing remained but to go home and see her disgrace made public, and herself

the laughing stock of the Deerhurst gossips, or, worse still, the object of their insulting pity. Caroline was not one quietly to accept an adverse fate. Could she but get hold of Berkeley, the tide of fortune might even yet turn. She implored her father to wander with her through the Castle in hopes that they might stumble on him in some corner; but as this was much like hunting for a needle in a haystack, and as the chances seemed ten to one that they might light upon Lord Rotherhame instead, she at last yielded to her step-father's expostulations, and suffered herself to be led downstairs, alarming the household on her progress by convulsive sobs and gasps.

Lord Rotherhame, from his library window, watched the footman handing the young lady into her fly, and closing the door upon her with a flourish and half-concealed grin. The ruddy-faced driver lashed his lean hack with magnificent energy, and having watched the shabby equipage jolt over the drawbridge and disappear among the trees, Lord Rotherhame turned away, a grim smile upon his lips.

## CHAPTER VI.

I dreamed that as I wandered by the way,  
Bare winter suddenly was changed to spring!

SHELLEY.

I must have patience to endure the load.

SHAKESPEARE.

THE morning after the Bradshaw's unsuccessful raid on Rotherhame Castle, Mr. Robert Bogle, having concluded his unpunctual breakfast, sat himself down before his father's dining-room fire in company with a college friend, of the name of Powles. The young men were evidently enjoying to the full the sweets of the *dolce far niente*. Mr. Powles' feet reposed easefully on the grey marble mantelshelf; and Robert, toasting one leg upon the fender, rested the other on his sister's lap. Ellen and Mary, who had been dutifully waiting on the gentlemen during their repast, would fain have drawn nearer to warm their purple hands; but when Mr. Powles, touched with some faint compunction, inquired "Ain't you cold?" Robert had nipped their rising hopes with the prompt reply, "No, never mind them! Draw in Powles, its beastly cold this morning!" Powles accordingly "drew in," and Robert produced a pipe, in direct violation of paternal regulations. The girls would fain have

withdrawn for a run in the garden before lessons. But Robert loved an audience, and enjoyed airing his undergraduate jokes before his mystified and admiring sisters. Besides, Ellen made him a comfortable leg-rest, and Mary was useful in fetching and carrying, in keeping up the fire, and ringing the bell.

Mr. Powles, like Robert, proposed consecrating himself to the service of the sanctuary, and both young probationers had already made public their intention of wearing vestments when their time should come. Not that either had been brought to this determination by conscientious conviction, but they were both of opinion that it would be rare fun to make the old spinsters of their congregations scowl, and the younger ladies smile approval. They had no intention of hampering themselves with the grind of the humdrum Daily Office, but meant rather to concentrate their energies on getting up such a "first-class ritual" as should attract public attention, and draw together a curious congregation from far and wide. The latest fashion, not Catholic tradition, nor a natural sense of what is reverent and devotional, was the test by which the two collegians decided what was or was not a "good service;" and accordingly, when they found themselves let in for a function which could boast no such accessories as lights, incense, or music, they thought themselves absolved from behaving with decorum, and would intersperse their



ostentatious reverences with smirks, loud yawns, and grunts of contempt.

Mr. Powles was listening with chuckles of appreciative amusement to Robert's scathing description of the clerics whose parishes bordered on his father's. One "quavered and quacked like a dying duck;" another was "fat as a pig," and could "hardly wedge himself into his pulpit." The Tractarian divine in the adjoining village was "green enough to imagine himself a good Churchman;" and the lately deceased Evangelical Vicar of St. Dunstan's was courteously characterized as "a Puritanical old jackass." Powles, who had been awed by Robert's coarse brutality into a kind of respectful adulation, manifested such keen appreciation of his satire that Robert was warmed into volunteering to quit his lounge and go upstairs to hunt for the funeral sermon preached on the last-named gentleman, which he declared to be such "rare sport" that Powles *must* see it. The girls were a little nervous at being left alone with the formidable Oxonian, but tried to pluck up courage to entertain him till Robert should return.

"Clever fellow, that brother of yours, Miss Bogle!" remarked Powles. "Can keep us all in a roar at Queen's, when he pleases."

"Yes, he's *awfully* amusing," rejoined Mary, with the fervour of sincerity. "I wonder whether he'll think it wrong to marry *when* he becomes a clergyman? I don't

think he would care to be a bachelor. He's too great a flirt for that ! ”

Mary quivered as she uttered the last words, which to her mind had about them a fascinating flavour of that “ wicked world,” which to the Doctor's daughters was forbidden ground.

“ No particular spoon in this part of the world, has he ? ” inquired Mr. Powles, after a meditative pause.

“ I think he likes Tot Browel, whom we are expecting this afternoon, you know, as well as anybody in the neighbourhood ; but I never saw him pay so much attention to any girl as he did to *our* friend, Geraldine Egerton. Oh, those two *did* go on, just about ! didn't they, Ellen ? ”

“ I shouldn't be at all surprised if we had her for our sister-in-law, one of these days,” returned Ellen, with a sagacious nod.

“ 'Pon my honour, Bogle might as well have given me a wrinkle. What sort of a girl is the fortunate young fair ? ”

“ Oh, lovely ! So tall and stylish-looking ! ”

“ Good family ? ” inquired Mr. Powles, laconically.

“ I believe, indeed, I *know*, she has titled relations,” replied Mary, in a tone of reflection ; “ and they must be well off, for they keep a pair of horses, and they are always giving presents.”

“ Cave, cave, Mary,” whispered Ellen ;

"he is coming," and even as she spoke the subject of their confidences tramped back into the room.

"Couldn't find the funeral oration, Powles, but here's something that'll do as well for the nonce." And he handed his friend a book of Oxford comical essays, whose obscure witticisms called forth paroxysms of laughter in the initiated undergraduates. It was all Greek to Ellen and Mary, though, in order to curry favour with the gentlemen, they would now and then make an appearance of joining in their mirth, or more flattering still, humbly solicit explanations.

"A flame of yours expected to-day, Bogle, I hear," remarked Powles, when the book at last was laid upon the table.

"Poor Tot Browel! Ah! I wonder whether she has forgiven me yet for having turned the cold shoulder on her at our dance on Twelfth Night. She was looking so horrid seedy that evening, that for the life of me I could not make up my mind to give her a dance. I kept on going near, as though I meant to ask her, and then when it came to the point, and I saw her eyes looking like two boiled gooseberries, my courage failed me, and I cut off again. It was too bad, for she had only two names on her card. Oh, dear, it made me feel ready to split when I saw her longing glances, as I turned my back upon her."

"Awful cruelty," cried Powles, with a grin

of exquisite enjoyment. "And, if what I hear is true, that wounded heart is not the only one you are responsible for, old boy. I've been told a sad story of a fascinating young creature who, not long ago, went off from Rotherhame inconsolable, because 'dear Bob *could* not be brought up to the scratch.'"

"What, Geraldine Egerton?" answered Bob, his lips widening, and a dull gleam awaking in his eye. "I don't know that she need give up hope yet. She *was* a stunner, Powles."

"Well, by all accounts she wouldn't do badly, Bob; tin, beauty, and relations of the name of 'Sir' or 'Lord,' into the bargain, I'm given to understand."

"Name, 'Sir,' Powles; what a way of talking!" and Mr. Bogle emitted a contemptuous sniff.

"Bobby, dear," interrupted Mary, "won't papa be in a wax? I have heard him calling you all over the house, for ever so long."

"Let him rave!" responded Mr. Robert, who had for some moments been listening with philosophic indifference to the ever loudening roars without.

"Well, I'm glad to hear so good an account of Mrs. Bob elect's looks and connections. You must bring her to see me, Bob, after the honeymoon."

Powles was here interrupted by the bursting open of the door, and the next moment

Dr. Bogle broke into the room, red with anger, and bellowing like a bull. Every hair in his beard seemed to be stiffened and to bristle with rage. Even Robert was appalled.

"Ro-bert," he stuttered, "how dare you not answer when I call to you? Here have I been shouting myself hoarse, while you sit lollopping over the fire, without so much as vouchsafing a word in answer. What do you mean by your impudence? I tell you, sir, I won't stomach it! I won't, indeed!"

"How should I know you were calling?" answered Robert, sulkily. "It wasn't my fault that that ass, Mary, heard you all the time, and never mentioned it till just this instant."

"I'm not an ass, Robert," interrupted Mary, goaded to resentment.

"Yes, you *are* an ass," returned her father, approaching her threateningly, as if about to box her ears. "You *are* an ass, if you heard me calling and didn't tell your brother. Now don't contradict."

Poor Mary shrank back as far as possible out of reach of her irate parent's hand, but luckily for her ears, Dr. Bogle at the moment stumbled over his son's outstretched legs, and his wrath was directed into another channel.

"And as for you, Robert," he bawled, "a great fellow of your age ought to be ashamed of idling away his whole morning over the fire; you may be sure, sir, I shall not

countenance your being ordained till I see a very marked change in you."

"Shan't ask your countenance," growled the hopeful candidate for Holy Orders.

As Robert waxed crosser, his father began to cool.

"Well, well," he said, "we'll say no more about it for this once. But you'd best put on a pleasanter face, for here's the Earl come down, and waiting in the drawing-room on purpose to see you."

"What the dickens does *he* want?" grunted the recalcitrant Robert, shaking his ashes into the fire.

"That's exactly what I'm going to tell you, if you'll have the goodness to attend to me. Come outside and speak a word in the passage."

And with a mysterious clearing of the throat Dr. Bogle left the room, followed by his son and heir, whose countenance still wore an aspect of concentrated sulkiness.

"So you have found him at last, Doctor," said Lord Rotherhame, as, after a brief injunction to accept warmly whatever the Earl might propose, the Rector and his son entered the drawing-room.

"Yes, here he is, Lord Rotherhame; he had only just finished his breakfast, good-for-nothing fellow," and Robert's parent patted him playfully on the back. "Young people don't keep such good hours now-a-days as they did when you and I were lads,

though I will say for Bob that I believe he's up and in chapel with the lark at Queen's."

"I have been telling your father, Robert," said Lord Rotherhame, sinking back on the sofa and looking attentively at the uncouth youth, "that I am on the look out for a university man—of superior attainments," he continued, smiling, "to read with Berkeley before he goes up to matriculate. Should you care to come to us till Easter, and try what you can do with him? We go to town at the end of the month, and there you and he could attend lectures together."

Robert stared. But when the notion penetrated to his brain that he, Berkeley's supposed friend, almost his contemporary, was invited to transform himself into his preceptor, he laughed outright.

The Doctor interposed.

"It is most thoughtful of Lord Rotherhame, Robert," he said, "to think of giving us this little help while you are at home doing nothing, and just as I had been to so much expense about your university education. Why I don't suppose such an offer was ever made to an undergraduate before. He would be delighted, my dear Lord, delighted to be of service to any one of your beloved family, and it would be a real satisfaction to me to think that at this critical period of his life Robert should be enjoying the benefit of your surveillance!"

"Do you think you can undertake this

charge, Robert?" repeated his god-father, who, as if fascinated by the young man's ugliness, continued to gaze upon him.

"Well, I'm not so sure I could," he answered, with unfeigned hesitation. "I really don't know much more than Berkeley himself, and I am sure I should not be equal to coaching him for Oxford."

"That I do not expect of you. As I said, Berkeley can attend lectures in London, and I intend myself to see that he works properly. He was very idle where he was last, and needs to be well kept up to the mark. In fact, that is the kind of thing I want you to do for me. Will you repeat to Robert, Doctor, what I told you just now?" he added, with obvious embarrassment.

"Why, the fact is this, my boy. You must know that our young friend has been not altogether satisfactory in his conduct of late, and Lord Rotherhame has determined—most wisely, I am sure—to take him in hand, and overcome in him that impatience of control which is such a distressing symptom of the rising generation."

"In short," interposed Lord Rotherhame, with a movement of impatience, "he wants a little breaking in. He has given me so much trouble that he is for the present decidedly in my black books, and I intend to deny him every indulgence, and to give him as much work and as little play as his health will stand. I cannot be always dancing



attendance on him, and I want some one to look after him for me, to see that he carries out my orders, and to tell me if he neglects them. This kind of work you could do as well—indeed better than a stranger. One should wash one's dirty linen at home, and I am sure," he added, with a desperate effort to appear confidential, "that I may rely upon you not to make public property of our little domestic differences."

"Indeed," exclaimed the Doctor, with solemn fervour, "you may rely on Robert to regard as most sacred whatever confidence you may think fit to repose in him, and to do his little best to give you satisfaction."

"Oh, of course," blurted out Robert, urged by a reproachful glance from his parent into accepting the distasteful project with an appearance of greater heartiness.

Were the truth known, there was no love lost between the reputed friends. Every word and look of the bully grated on Ralph's refined instincts, and Robert, vaguely conscious of the antipathy he excited, and always envious of those whom fortune favoured above himself, nourished in secret a savage ill-will against the young heir.

"Then we may consider the thing as settled," and Lord Rotherhame rose with an air of palpable relief. "You engage to face a little dulness for three or four months, and in return I will send you a cheque for a

hundred pounds with which to amuse yourself when your task is done."

"Oh, but that is far too liberal!" cried the Doctor. "Without any thought of reward, I can answer for Bobby's doing his utmost. Pray reduce the sum by at least one half, and we shall be more than satisfied."

"No, indeed! I shall be glad to give my godson a little help, and Robert's office will be no sinecure. The particulars of our arrangements may, I think, be left till he takes up his abode with us. When can you come to us, Robert? The earliest date will suit me best."

"As you are in a hurry, I don't see why it should not be the day after to-morrow," said the Doctor.

"If I could wait a week or so, father," suggested Robert. "You know I can't very well get away while the Browel girls are here."

"Non-sense, Bobby! Surely the Miss Browels can make themselves happy a few days quietly with your sisters, without wanting a pack of young men at their heels."

"Oh, dear me, must you really wait a week?" said Lord Rotherhame. "Could you not manage to come to us a little earlier, to-morrow or the day after, as your father suggested? You could run over and see your friends from the Castle you know."

This suggestion was so very gracious that

Robert dared not show how poor a compensation he thought the proposed half-hour's call for the loss of a whole week's fun and flirtation with Tot and Julia Browel.

"Ye-es, so I could," he answered, as if half convinced; "the only doubt is about my clothes and things. I really don't see how they could be got ready so soon."

"Oh, yes, my dear boy, you can manage perfectly—ve-ry well indeed! He shall come the day after to-morrow, Lord Rotherhame, and if anything should be left behind, why, he's not going a hundred miles off, and it must be sent after him, that's all!"

"Thank you very much. I trust I shall not put Robert to any real inconvenience," and so saying, Lord Rotherhame, having first invited Robert to bring his friend up that afternoon and make use of the billiard table, put on his great coat and took his departure, while Bobby, returning to the dining-room, put the finest gloss he could upon his new engagement, descanting pompously on all he intended to do when he should be "up at the Castle," how he should "order this," and "shouldn't stand that," and what "a rattling big ball he should get up before Lent to make the old place bearable."

It was a lovely morning, and as Lord Rotherhame left the Rectory garden the air was quivering with the first faint rapture of returning spring. Austere, hard January *had passed away*, and the mild February

breeze kissed the moistened earth, as though longing to draw forth the fragrance of the imprisoned flowers, and assist the impatient buds which reddened the bare boughs to burst their bonds. Too long had the iron frost bound them in fetters, and it seemed as if they chafed at the delay which Dame Nature, anticipating bleak March winds to come, wisely prescribes for her tender nurselings.

Everywhere the world was stirring in its sleep. A dreamy, half-awake twittering throbbed through the gentle atmosphere, the sun peeped smiling from behind a soft cloud-veil, as a mother who draws aside a curtain to greet her waking child, and over all there brooded an air of calm thankfulness as of battlewon—wintry death had been conquered, and the earth was putting on her victorious robe of green. Strange that at such a time the human heart should be more drawn to think on death than in the shortening days of autumn, when one by one the flowers depart, and hollow winds drive the dead leaves before them. Does not the mystery of our nature and destiny give the key to this apparent contradiction? Is it not that while the Fall of the Year speaks only with Pagan hopelessness of the final triumph of decay, it is Spring's redemptive lesson that resurrection follows death, and therefore man would fain accept her sweet teaching rather than the dreary autumnal creed, and beneath her

influence feels his soul drawn up in yearning ineffable and tender towards the pure Life that is to come. Even Lord Rotherhame's clouded brow seemed to lighten as he walked homewards through the maze of tangled shrubberies, saw the snowdrops lift their virgin heads, watched the sunlight quiver through interlacing boughs, and heard the gurgle of the streamlet. "Despair itself grows mild" beneath the spell of God-made loveliness, and though no hopeful ray came to brighten the gloom of this man who, when alone and free to follow his bent, seemed to have no power to smile, a look of softened melancholy crept over his face as he sat down on a fallen tree, over whose stem ivies were running wildly, and looked up into the sky. We might learn to judge even bad men more kindly, and therefore more truly, could we see them when they think themselves alone, when the tumult of human pride and passion is momentarily lulled, and the deafened ear opens to hear the far-off murmurs of the Father's holy Voice. Then the eye will sometimes speak a language, taught in Eden, which the rebel tongue has lost the faculty to utter, and God's fallen children *look* a prayer. It may well be that no thought was farther from Lord Rotherhame that gentle morning than to mock with a prayer One in the breach of Whose awful laws he lived, but those who love truly need not the gross medium of verbal explanation

to make them understand the woes of their beloved, and the mutest glance from an enslaved and burdened soul wings its arrowed way direct to the mighty Heart of God.

He lingered a few minutes in his vernal retreat, and then rose slowly. He turned his head and gazed a moment in the direction from which he had come, as though hesitating whether or no to go back and undo his morning's work. Then again he turned about and resumed his walk towards the Castle, but slowly, as though still irresolute. Suddenly the sound of voices checked his progress. Acquaintances perhaps were near, and Lord Rotherhame seldom faced an acquaintance without a mental struggle. He stood listening.

A woman was speaking, and as the speaker drew nearer, and the voice became more distinct, something familiar in its accents chased in a moment the dreamy look from his face, and brought an alert and startled brightness to his eyes. Yes, that piping plaint was unmistakable. His visitor of the day before was at hand, and through the laurel boughs he could see the tip of her scarlet feather, the shining crown of her father's chimney-pot hat, the big white tie on which his flat chin rested. But who was their companion? whose the tall, masculine figure at Miss Bradshaw's side? In a second the tiger that had slept awoke within; Lord Rotherhame came forward softly, a restrained fury in his face.

"Planty! Planty!"—this much he could distinguish between Caroline's recurrent sobs—"you do love me still, don't you? One kind word, and I will forgive all—all the agony you have caused me. You mean when you are free to redeem your word, I know, and I will trust you through thick and thin, however appearances may be against you."

She seemed to stagger, as if weak with emotion, and to lean upon him for support.

Lord Rotherhame had no fancy to play the eavesdropper, and at this point he came forward and raised his hat.

A shriek of unaffected terror pierced the air, and Caroline in her dismay fell back a pace, trampling on her father's toes, and tearing her dress among the briars.

"Carry! be a little careful, will you?" cried the injured Mr. Bradshaw, with justifiable asperity.

But all emotions of physical pain were instantly forgotten when her terrified pinch called his attention to the figure that had now swelled their number.

Ralph, recovering from his surprise, stepped forward and faced his father, a slight pallor alone showing his agitation.

"I fear I interrupt a private interview of an interesting nature," said Lord Rotherhame, in a tone of savage irony, after he had watched a moment with a kind of revengeful enjoyment the consternation of the Bradshaws. "But as I have some claim to share

my son's confidence, you will allow me, Mr. Bradshaw, to ask what has been the subject of the conversation which my appearance has terminated so abruptly."

"Certainly, you shall know, Lord Rotherhame," returned Mr. Bradshaw, trying hard to keep himself from stammering. "We—we—were—taking a little stroll through your beautiful estate, and—er—in so doing, accidentally encountered my old pupil, and—er—naturally"—

"Availed yourself of the opportunity to induce him to cheat and disobey his father? Fie, sir! You value your office and character but lightly if you can drag them through the dirt for the sake of gaining a titled son-in-law. Since you go such lengths, I make no apology for waiving ceremony on my side, and I remind you, Mr. Bradshaw, that these grounds are not open to the public."

"Father," exclaimed Ralph, flushing scarlet, "you forget that Mr. Bradshaw has a lady with him."

"Very aptly said!" cried Mr. Bradshaw, shaking from head to foot with mingled fear and anger. "Do you mean to say, my Lord, that you will positively turn this lady—your guest—out of your grounds by force? Is that the action of a gentleman?"

"Begone, sir," said Lord Rotherhame, turning towards Ralph with a flash and involuntarily raising his cane. "I mean to say this," he went on, as his son, gnawing his



under-lip, slowly obeyed the mandate, "that, however my character as a gentleman may suffer in your eyes, I order you, Mr. Bradshaw, to quit my property, and forbid you to set foot on it again. I bear you no resentment, sir. Like the rest of the world you have only been pursuing your own interests, but as they happen to clash with mine, I may be excused from excluding you from any place in which I happen to have authority, and I therefore once more bid you . . . go! You are a lady, madam, and are, of course at liberty to accompany your father, or remain here, as you please."

"Come, my child," said Mr. Bradshaw, whose face by this time was the colour of a peony, "I will not suffer you to remain here to be insulted. Come with me! Lord Rotherhame! vengeance is no part of a minister of the Gospel of peace, but—but—I can wish you no worse punishment than to be left to your own bad heart and conscience!"

Lord Rotherhame bowed with scornful composure, stood his ground till he had seen his uninvited guests turn their backs, and then strode away in the direction which his son had taken.

Ralph was standing against the fence which divided the shrubberies from the forest, awaiting his father's approach. He eyed him as he drew near with evident apprehension, and, as if conscious that his only chance lay in obtain-

ing the first word, advanced and began speaking while he was yet at some yards' distance.

"Do not condemn me, till you have heard my story. I had no intention of breaking my word to you. My meeting with them was, as *he* said, an accident."

His son's straightforward words checked the outburst that had been rising impetuously to Lord Rotherhame's lips, yet his reply was none of the gentlest.

"An accident! And if it was an accident does that justify you? After what has passed, and your formal promise of obedience to me, what right had you to interchange so much as a word with either of those people? Since you are so little to be trusted, I am the more glad that I have engaged young Bogle to come up and watch you for me!"

Lord Rotherhame was not sorry to make this disagreeable communication while his blood was up, and while his policy was receiving fresh justification from Ralph's apparent duplicity. Eager in his self-defence, however, the boy scarcely grasped the meaning of the words.

"Apart, altogether, from my duty to you," he said, in a voice which trembled, "you surely do not think that I can have any wish now to see or speak to *her*! I had met her only the minute before you appeared—as I told you—and she followed me into the shrubbery and held my arm."

"And what did *you* do? Let me, if you please, know every detail of this romantic episode."

"I said," returned Ralph, obediently, and averting his face, now darkened by a gloomy shade, "I said—for Heaven's sake let me go! I do not even dare to look you in the face!"

"Go on," said his father.

"There is nothing more that you would care to hear."

"No matter! I have already told you to repeat exactly what took place."

"She caught at my hand, and said, 'The ring! Oh, Ralph, where is your ring?'"

"And you answered?"

"That I had thrown it in the fire! And I said, I am disgraced in your eyes and in my own, and your innocent sorrow is a less heavy load to bear than my remorse and shame. That was all that passed, except a few words she spoke in answer, which your coming interrupted, and which have escaped my memory."

His son's confession touched Lord Rotherhame with a sense of pathos, and he felt drawn to lay his hand upon his shoulder with something like his old caress. But it is thrice hard to forgive those whom we have injured, and the remembrance of the manner in which he had once lowered himself in his son's eyes by his ungoverned rage, and of each word and look by which Ralph had since

revealed to him the contemptuous feelings he had then excited, rose up coldly between them.

"Very well," he said, "I don't know that I need find fault, and I am glad you have been candid. Should you ever fall in with Mr. Bradshaw again, however, recollect that it is not necessary to recognise him. And now, did you take in what I told you about Robert Bogle? I have asked him to come with us to London to read with you till Easter."

Berkeley flushed a deeper red, and he darted a glance of involuntary reproach towards his father. This choice of a person whom Lord Rotherhame knew well from by-gone confidences to be, beyond all others, distasteful to him, showed plainly that his father was, indeed, carrying out with remorseless deliberation his professed intention to make his probation a time of misery.

"And he will stay longer should the smallest impertinence or disobedience on your part make it necessary," continued Lord Rotherhame, noting the unconscious defiance of his expression.

The two walked on in silence, Ralph trying to repress his dangerous longing to throw off the yoke, and fling his father's pardon back into his face. But not a hundred yards off, silent beneath the waving grass, lay one who with her dying breath had bade him obey and love his father always for her sake.

Thoughts of the past came thronging thick and fast upon him, remembrances of the day when he had gone for his first ride through this very glade on his father's horse, while his fair young mother stood beneath the oak-trees tremblingly watching his progress, and of other times since, when his father's lips had had for him nothing but smiles and tender bantering words. Only six weeks ago, and they two could scarcely have crossed the forest together, unless Lord Rotherhame's arm had been round his son's neck, and Ralph pouring forth crude unformed theories, with reckless confidence into his father's ears. Days so bright, so deliciously free and glad, that they were worth buying back at the cost of a few months' patience! What if some of the fair hues, with which fancy had ever painted his father's portrait, had been rubbed out by the rude hand of a harsh experience! Perfection must not be expected! His father had been deeply angered, and the structure of love must be built on a feeble foundation, indeed, if a few sharp shocks can shake it into ruins.

Thus Ralph reasoned with his resentment, and determined to take fresh patience, to turn a deaf ear to the fear his heart whispered that the old days had died, indeed—never more to have a resurrection.

The pair reached the Castle and parted, still in silence, and though he had not been able to bring himself to speak one relenting

word, Lord Rotherhame, as he went alone into the library and missed the unfailing attendant who had been wont to follow him so closely, felt that he could have found relief in tears.

## CHAPTER VII.

What power delights to torture us ? I know  
That to myself I do not wholly owe  
What now I suffer, tho' in part I may.  
Alas ! none strewed fresh flowers upon the way,  
Where, wandering heedlessly, I met pale pain,  
My shadow, which will leave me not again.  
If I have erred, there was no joy in error  
But pain and insult, and unrest and terror.

SHELLEY.

ROBERT BOGLE sat alone in the cosy room into which he had just been formally inducted by Lord Rotherhame. A snug tent-bed with crimson curtains and snow-white pillows stretched invitingly in one corner, and upon the table and old-fashioned bureau were sprinkled Robert's clothes and other belongings, which he had been extracting from his portmanteau. It wanted half-an-hour to dinner-time, there was nothing particular to do, and feeling in his own way shy and uncomfortable, he had dropped down upon an arm-chair by the open window, and was looking out into the mild February evening.

The sun had set, but in the west there lingered an orange glow, whose brightness fell tenderly on the dark, slender fir trees beneath, and on the velvet slopes of the forest with its herd of antlered deer. The clear peal of bells ringing for evensong filled the air with soft vibrations, and beyond a glade

naked elms, round whose tops the rooks  
wheeling, rose the square outline of the  
church tower. There the little congregation  
would now be gathering, to say their  
prayers to Him to Whom all night  
the holy Angels sing unceasingly. The  
old village people loved this hour  
in, in the falling shadows, they knelt upon  
worn hassocks and heard the good  
familiar words. Their church was part and  
parcel of their quiet lives; a visible link be-  
tween their earthly and heavenly homes.  
In the hour, when by the old stone font,  
the Eternal wings had overshadowed  
all, their tenderest recollections had been  
woven with its shade. There, as little  
children, kneeling by fathers and mothers,  
since dust, they had lisped their earliest  
verses; there, the Chief Pastor, like Him who  
is the friend of children, had laid his hands  
on their heads in blessing; at that altar,  
where they had first partaken of the Food of  
immortality, a happy married life had been  
won and sanctified, and at last when life's  
yoke of labour should have worn to night,  
their tired bodies would be brought to rest  
peacefully beneath the green turf, bright with  
flowers, like unto the garden in which Christ  
was laid. But Robert, though his fancy  
dwelt for the moment to the rite, in which  
evening he had taken part, thought of no such  
things as these. Neither did he ponder on  
God, Whose Voice is heard by faithful



ears, in stirring trees at eventide. Vesper devotions he paid indeed, but to the shrine of self, his own debased divinity. Opportunities for advancement, he reflected, such as might never again present themselves, were now within his grasp.

"Introduced to the cream of London society, under the wing of such a man as Rotherhame," his father had said that afternoon, as they walked together from the Rectory to the Castle, "you will have a better chance of rising than falls to ninety-nine young fellows out of a hundred, and if you fail to make the most of it, why the more fool you, that's all!"

"It's easy for *you* to talk, staying at home in comfort, with none of the bother of it," Bob had growled in reply.

"Bother! that's all my eye, Bob! If you can't face a little drudgery, you're not the man to push your way in the world. Now listen to me. It's plain that, somehow or other, Berkeley has got himself out of his father's good graces. The Earl is, as we all know, an eccentric, moody man, and one not apt to forget a grudge. He wants, as I see plain enough, to give our young friend a taste of the lash—morally speaking, of course—and he looks to you to help him in little bits of work that are not choice enough for his aristocratic fancy. Study his fads; gain a character for vigilance and compliance in his eyes; above all, *never be above your work*,

and you will gain something better than a hundred-pound note, the gratitude of a man whose influence can secure you a first-rate social position, and lucrative employment in almost any profession."

And so as he sat by the window, with the solemn breeze coming in from the pure heaven above, and seeming to reprove his sordid musings, Bob thought over his father's counsels, and splendid visions rose before his mental eye of amorous conquests, run-away matches with heiresses, and subsequent reconciliations with high-born fathers-in-law. A tap at the door broke in upon his reverie, and a footman entered with a message from Lord Rotherhame, requesting Mr. Bogle to join him in the library. Robert went downstairs. All over the old house the light was fading fast, and the cloistral galleries were veiled in dusky silence. A tall figure rose from the window recess as he entered the library, and he found himself face to face with Berkeley. Under the circumstances their meeting could not fail to be awkward, and the formal politeness of his pupil's manner betrayed that he was painfully alive to the change in his relations with his playmate of bygone days—to the fact that the thick-witted bully had been brought to his home to do work which no gentleman would have done, to spy on and oppress his fallen foe.

"Good evening," he said, holding out his

hand, and looking at Robert with large pensive eyes, whilst his lips contracted fastidiously.

"Evenin'! It's ever so long since I've seen you. Hope you're all right again by this time."

"Perfectly, thanks, except that I have not quite recovered the strength of my muscles yet," and Berkeley handled regretfully the round hard knobs upon his arms. "I hear I am to have the pleasure of your company for the next few weeks."

"Well, yes, I believe our governors have settled something of the kind between 'em. By the way, was it you who sent the message asking me to come down? The footman told me Lord Rotherhame."

"My father sent for me. Perhaps he wants us both—here he comes," and Berkeley glanced towards the door with the faintest tinge of red upon his cheek.

A footman followed Lord Rotherhame carrying candles, and Oscar, his favourite bloodhound, pushing past the servant, came close up at his master's heels.

"So there you are, both of you," said Lord Rotherhame, and he regarded the two youths with an eye which expressively suggested that he was making a mental comparison.

They were indeed a complete contrast, curiously representative of two extremes of widely-differing castes. The self-conscious, plebeian Oxonian, short-legged, large-jawed,

dull-eyed, looked more than usually unattractive beside the tall, fair boy, with his deep eyes, and air of graceful high breeding.

"Sit down, please, Bogle, and you also, Berkeley. I want to say a few words to you both together, that there may be no misunderstanding in the future. I must remind you once more, Robert, that Berkeley has been giving me a good deal of trouble lately, and that it is my intention to show him that for the future it is to his interest to be a little more amenable. I hope, as you have consented to be his companion, you can make up your mind to rub on for a few months without much amusement."

Robert shifted his feet uneasily, and stole a glance at Ralph, whose now habitual expression of determined self-restraint imparted to his proudly-formed features a yet prouder look.

"Certainly, Lord Rotherhame," he answered, with an awkward smile.

"You will not suffer from lack of occupation if you carry out this little scheme," and Lord Rotherhame pointed out a long paper which lay upon the writing table. "I have made a rough draft of the hours I wish Berkeley to devote to work. You see I recommend early rising, Bogle. His wits are likely to be brighter the first thing in the morning, and his health will require early hours at night."

Six o'clock in the morning to begin on

Euclid. Six o'clock in the winter, when the first streaks of dawn would not have illumined the dark east, and the housemaid even be snoring in bed.

Robert's sluggard, ease-loving soul shrank back and mentally coiled itself up within the warm refuge of that fascinating feather-bed in his prophet's chamber upstairs, and his eye rolled appalled over the long succession of days, each divided into many weary endless hours, that bore in this black list such penitential names as Lexicon, Latin prose, mathematics, natural science and history.

Lord Rotherhame ran lightly over the appalling programme with the young tutor.

"Every fortnight," he said, "I hope to find time to put Berkeley through some sort of examination myself to stimulate his energy. You must work hard, Ralph, I shall soon find out whether you put your will into it or not. And you will have the kindness to be very punctual yourself, Robert, I have no doubt, and will carefully make a note every day of the hour at which Berkeley comes down."

"It is not likely I shall be later than the hour you appoint," said Ralph, in a voice which to Robert's ear had a touch of hardness.

"I should recommend you rather to err on the other side," returned his father, with an imperious glance. "I have left you, you see, Robert, free after luncheon till four o'clock, and again Berkeley has an hour's

leisure at nine. This, with intervals for meals, will be all that is necessary for his health. You yourself will be able to rest in addition while he is preparing his work for you."

Robert's heart sank yet lower, but he hid his depression beneath his usual stolid look. Ralph sat with his eyes fixed on the picture opposite, as though he scarcely heeded what was passing.

"And finally, Ralph," said Lord Rotherhame, handing his programme to the tutor and turning to his son, "I must make you understand that for the present you are debarred from all the ordinary luxuries of home life. You will meet your sisters at meals and sometimes in the evenings, but you are not to go to their rooms without permission. You must neither read novels, nor shoot, nor ride. Your horse will be sold on the first opportunity, and only when you have successfully stood the test to which I am putting you, shall I buy you another. You may go!"

Berkeley rose, pale and silent, and Robert, after a moment's uncomfortable hesitation, followed him from the room, feeling as if he himself had been undergoing a kind of castigation, and disagreeably conscious that the castles he had built of balls, theatres, and rides with the young ladies, were tumbling to pieces about his ears.

Well, even so, more substantial advantages might still be gained—a golden harvest reaped from this wintry and laborious sow-

ing. Had it not been for those ghastly six o'clock risings, those awful fortnightly examinations which should try his preceptorial work as though by fire, he felt he could have rubbed on with decent comfort.

His companions would be, however, sore drawbacks. They had so little in common with him, used such "honied words," and both, as he phrased it, "thought such a precious lot of their blessed selves."

"Excuse me, Robert," said Berkeley, when they had gone a few steps, "but if you will go on to my sitting-room I will join you directly. I have a word to say to my father."

He ran lightly back, and Robert heard him knock at the library door.

"One comfort is," soliloquised the tutor, "that now they are on these terms, one won't be dosed *ad nauseam* with all the billing and cooing that used to go on. Young Stuck-up seems a good bit less cock-a-hoop already than he used. It won't be bad for him to keep his tail between his legs awhile."

Lord Rotherhame glanced up surprised, when Berkeley reappeared. He noticed that he was a good deal embarrassed, and that his hand shook as taking an unopened letter from his pocket he held it out to him.

"Since you told me to have no communication with *them*," he said, in a low voice, "I thought perhaps I ought to bring this to you."

Lord Rotherhame glanced at the big square envelope directed in a large, but rather characterless hand to—

“The Viscount Berkeley,  
“Rotherhame Castle,  
St. Dunstan’s.”

The post mark was Clifton, and told nothing, but it was not difficult to guess the writer.

“Quite right,” he said. “Remain here, however, that if you never learn the contents, you may at least have the satisfaction of seeing your correspondent’s communication safely committed to the flames.”

He broke the seal, and as he did so the unbidden blood rushed again to Ralph’s face. It was a hard thing to see his private letter opened by another, to have to assist at the deed, to stand by and watch the sarcastic smile on his father’s lip as he read. But all this was included in the pledge he had voluntarily given, part of the price he had elected to pay for the privilege of remaining at home with his kindred, and he bore it in uncomplaining silence.

“Whether intended for your eyes or no, I cannot pretend to decide,” said Lord Rotherhame, presently, “but the revelation which this letter imparts of your would-be wife’s true character—a revelation which two months since she would have kept from you at the cost of any amount of duplicity and



stratagem, is too instructive to be lost. Now listen ! ”

“ The White Leopard, St. Dunstan’s.

“ Feb. 5.

“ DEAREST OLD WOMAN,—

“ Just a line to tell you that to-morrow we go on to uncle’s for a night, next day home, that our bother is over, and I think I am well out of the business. Pity for Planty and my own silly imagination made me fancy myself in love with him, but now that I have seen him once more and found how different he really is to what I have been picturing him—what a weak, timid, vacillating goose he can show himself—the spell is broken, and I am, I hope, cured for good and all. You will split over the particulars when you hear them—at the present moment I have no time for details, as the train starts in half an hour. But, oh ! Anna, love, heaven preserve me from such a father-in-law as I was within an ace of having ! I see now where Planty gets his ludicrous primness and pomposity from, though in all conscience, for stuck-up, strutting, turkey-cock airs, his dad beats him to fits. I can’t help feeling sorry for the poor fellow, for he certainly is awfully devoted to me, but it was a pitiful thing to see him cringe and cower before his father. I couldn’t have believed he would have behaved like that after all the valorous professions he was always making.

Between us all we were soon at daggers drawn, and at last, as much by my doing as by 'my lord Peacock's,' we came to the conclusion that we should not suit, and I, having first taken him down a peg or two, turned my back, and left him with his face all in a flame.

"We stay at uncle's over to-night for a jolly little party, a carpet dance and supper after. Some fellows belonging to the 55th are coming to it. Meet us by the 4.15 on Friday and order plenty of buttered-egg for tea. By the way, be sure you don't let the impression get about that I am the aggrieved party. The fault is more than half my own, and I don't wish to lay the blame of the jilt on any other shoulders. It's no fault of Planty's, poor fellow, if I have come to see that we were never suited to each other. One does want a real *man* in a husband. Love to mam and all the rest.

"Your ever loving sister,

"CAROLINE M. BRADSHAW."

As his father read, lingering, and, it appeared, almost gloating over each sentence which proved Miss Bradshaw false, vulgar-minded and unworthy, Ralph, filled with scrupulous fears that the document had not been intended for his eyes, made futile efforts to stop him. At the conclusion Lord Rotherham looked up at his son with an expression half curious, half pitying.

"See from what I have saved your crude inexperience. Another time you will not perhaps believe so implicitly in your own infallibility. There goes your Caroline's last missive into the fire, and with it, I hope, all memory of one so contemptible."

Ralph could not answer. Again his tears were rising, hot and angry. The kiss Caroline had pressed upon his lips at parting seemed to touch them again and freeze them, as the kiss of Judas.

"Have you done with me?" he asked, in a choking voice.

Lord Rotherhame felt a touch of compunction, and laid his hand upon his arm.

"Yes, go," he answered, "only don't be breaking your heart over such a flimsy bit of pink and white inanity as this Miss Bradshaw. One of these days I shall, no doubt, be welcoming as lovely a Lady Berkeley home as ever crossed the old Castle threshold—one blessed angel alone excepted."

"No, never, father, never!" and Berkeley turned and hurried from the room.

Lord Rotherhame felt a strange sickness at the heart. He took his hat and went out, out into the soft evening, and saw the grey veil that twilight had drawn over the sky, heard the sober rustle of the breeze in bushes and in grass, and gazed into the clear light that was fading in the west. The breeze blew more freshly now that the sun had gone, and all the trees and plants were bowing, as

though before the Presence of that Lord God Who once walked in a garden in the cool of day.

Lord Rotherhame's feet turned involuntarily towards the plank across the moat which led to his foster-mother's cottage. In all disturbed and gloomy moods, unless indeed his agitation were too deep for aught but solitude, or the society of his dead, he eagerly sought the old dame's company, partly because she was the one living sharer of the secret whose black shadow haunted his life, which tainted with bitter his purest pleasures, and poisoned hope and repentance at their source, partly also from force of habit, because from his boyhood till his marriage, Granny had been the one and only being to whom he had dared turn for sympathy.

A gleam through the fire-lit window showed him Weedon's burly form lounging, pipe in mouth, before the hearth, and the small figure of the orphan girl sitting thoughtful and lone, on her stool in the chimney corner.

He uttered a low whistle, a summons noted only by Granny's practised ear. Her head was too constantly occupied with her foster-son and his concerns for her to fail to catch the lightest intimation of his presence, and the next moment she had come out, and closing the kitchen door behind her, was hurrying along the twilight garden path towards him.

"And what's up, my son?" she asked, and her horny fingers closed over his hot dry hand with strange maternal tenderness. "You are down, to-night—by the *touch* of you, for I can't see your face."

"Nothing is up, Granny, only I am seized with one of my unaccountable fits of the blues, and felt it would do me good to have a word with you."

"Well, well, life's a weary thing at times for some, and I wish that I could bear a bit of the burden for you, my poor dear child."

"I'd be sorry for a tithe of my burden to be laid on any other shoulders," he answered, bitterly. "The Lord has seen fit to tie a mill-stone round my neck. If the Almighty," he went on passionately, after a moment's pause, "for some reason known to Himself, sets Himself against one unlucky individual from his birth into the world, why should the poor wretch torture himself with the fruitless endeavour to keep the laws of his Omnipotent Enemy? God's hand has been against me ever since I was born, and it is my wisest course to resign myself to the inevitable, and meet harshness with revenge!"

The old woman scarcely understood, and knew not how to combat, her master's bitter mood. She could only stroke his hand, and exhort him in such soothing tones as she might have used when he was a crying child, to "be patient, and look for better days."

He stood a long time silently, as if her

untutored accents were music in his ears, and gradually his face changed, its trouble subsiding into its normal look of deep quiet melancholy.

"Don't they say that the sweetest natures turn savage under an attack of gout?" he asked, abruptly.

"That they do, bless 'em! They'd be more than martel if they could stand that pain and not turn crusty now and then."

"It is my case," said Lord Rotherhame, "mine is gout—rheumatism of the soul, and the anguish sours me, maddens me at times to frenzy! I should be very different but for this blight upon me."

He passed his hand across his brow, and looked up towards the darkening sky. The stars were coming out, bright and solemn, and large fleeting clouds sailed over the eternal firmament, as ships cross some liquid waste of waves.

"And so you are really going to London, my Lord?" asked Granny, sorrowfully.

"In a fortnight, yes. But I shall come down as usual every month to see how you get on."

"I shall miss you sorely! But now, my Lord, I feel—it mayn't be nothing more than the feelin' which makes one know when anything is going wrong with them one loves, and yet it *is* something more, for I've never felt easy since the night that strange 'Merican man was here, I told ye of—I feel as if danger

was ahead. I love ye better than my life, and though it may mean very little, I'd like to warn you to be on the look out."

"I don't know that it is possible for any serious danger to threaten me, Granny; your son Charles is the last person to turn up in England, or to care to turn up. The documents, and Tibbetts himself are safe, in a place of whose existence no one dreams, with the exception of Ralph, and I trust him implicitly. Our secret is shared in its entirety by my mother alone, and dead lips tell no tales."

"Maybe, maybe! and yet I can never feel quite easy while one lives, who, if he had the chance, might ruin you. And p'ra'ps 'tis my fears makes me fanciful, but it seems to me that ever since the stranger man was here, Ted has had a queer look about him, and he asks me questions that I don't half like, and brings up the old story of the murder oftener than he used, or has any call to't."

Granny felt her shaking hand grasped more tightly.

"Well, if any misgivings—the vaguest—are in your mind, remember that it is more essential to be on the guard yourself than to warn me," he answered. "All may depend on your self-control and vigilance."

"I took the pledge yesternight," whispered Granny. "'Twas like casting a slur on my own character, but I didn't dare trust

myself to be a bit easy with Ted, so long as I feared he might be on the scent, so I went to St. Dunstan's with the carrier as private as I could, and put my name down."

"Heaven bless you for it! One word more before we leave this miserable subject. I hear that Ted beats that child sometimes, Granny, and that you are harsher to her than is your wont with children. For God's sake, don't add to my self-reproach by treating her unkindly!"

"I'll try to mind what you say, my child, though you can't expect me to feel love to a little bundle of fat as comes between you and your peace of mind, and your own just rights."

Lord Rotherhame smiled sadly at her last words, and then imprinting a filial kiss on her rugged cheek he left her.

At the edge of the moat he paused, and looked back. The stars were growing brighter, coming out one behind another, a myriad host of wandering sentry lights, and to eyes accustomed to the night it was not difficult to discern the aged woman's form standing out against the fast fading after-glow. She was waiting till the last sound of her foster-child's footsteps should die in the distance. It would have been a natural thing to shout to her a friendly "Good-night," but Lord Rotherhame and Mrs. Weedon had grown used to holding intercourse in undertones. He went on without



a word, and the only sound that told her he was gone was the clanging of the iron door behind him.

It is strange how little one portion of mankind knows of the other's business. While we are working in the dark, in one cell of this busy hive we call "the world," another, perhaps, in some distant corner, is under-burrowing our petty fabric. At the moment that Granny Weedon parted from her foster-son, two hundred miles off, the stranger lawyer whom she vaguely feared, was seated alone in an upper room of a back street in Brompton, and by the light of a feeble lamp was reading a letter ill-spelt, and written in a round and clumsy hand.

"This be to tell you Sir" it ran, "that shes had a worse bout than hever yester evening and ran on so fast that I could arldly make ed or tale of Her. She give me to understand this here plainly them papers she say is safe and we have got them were the police won't never find them out and my lord says she won't niver Let them from under his own Roof and keepin—soon after this she turned sleepie, and I couldnt get nothing more out of her. I think she got frightened when she woke up, and she ast me where she had been talking and tis my Belief shes gone and took the Pledge for she haint tasted a drop of licker since."

Another letter was travelling the same

night in a direction very different to that its writer contemplated. It was the epistle—brief, but long enough to breathe love and constancy—which Miss Bradshaw had designed as a final cast for her faithless lover. These were the words which greeted Anna Bradshaw's eyes when she awoke next morning—

“Our mutual promise binds us for ever!  
One line, beloved, to tell me you in heart are  
true and faithful, and I give all else up and  
cleave to you alone, waiting in confidence  
the day of rapture when you will claim me  
as your own, and when I shall no longer be—

“Your most wretched,


“CARRIE.”

## CHAPTER VIII.

And so they all to merrie London came.

CHAUCER.

THE summer of the year of Grace 18— is remembered as one of the hottest seasons that have marked the century. All through July and August the sun sat royally on his throne of blue, and poured down on the parched panting world such volumes of dry heat and flaming light as left a red brand on every face, and scorched the earth's surface till it cracked. Each ambitious breeze that bestirred itself to contend against the universal languor only aggravated the evil it would have cured, by making the heat active instead of torpid. Cool spots there were to be found, oases in the arid desert, lone dells in the depths of the country, where a maze of vernal foliage hid the mossy ground from the sun's stare, still retreats in whose hidden hearts fresh waters bubbled, whither the silvery moonbeams crept by right of sympathy, and bathed at dead of night, where weary birds shot in to dip their burning beaks, and tune afresh throats which the air had rasped. But these haunts of holy silence were too remote, too secret, too well guarded, to afford refreshment to hot humanity, and only to picture them was



sufficient to fever the mind with tantalizing longings.

Along the coast vegetation died, and the sun's glitter wearied the eye like a confluence of gas-lamps. In London, the only colour that ever varied the blazing blue of the uniform firmament was the lurid purple of the thunder-clouds; phantom monsters, whose brooding presence filled the great wicked city with vague apprehensions, as before a coming judgment, whose bellow shook the houses to their foundations, and whose sword-flashes, as they fought above, wrought death and destruction in the world below.

The year was at its hottest, and London at its fullest, when one July morning Geraldine and Gertrude Egerton planted themselves on Westminster Bridge, and looked down upon the river, wending its slow course onwards. Wonderful old river! natural ally of the outcast and the destitute, who, when all other refuge fails them, may turn to its large bosom for a final shelter! River, whose turbid waters seem continually to invite confidence and promise secrecy.

The fairy-like pinnacles of the Parliament houses appeared the only things that had energy that sweltering day, and by virtue of their grace and lightness shot up daringly towards the sun; all others, buildings, mud-larks, animals, men, looked drooping and jaded, as though they would fain have laid

them down and gone to sleep. Lambeth Palace, old and grey, had, perhaps, gathered about its walls in six centuries of fog sufficient damp to keep it from scorching quite away, but grim Milbank had broken out into a scarlet fever, and St. Thomas's Hospital seemed literally on fire.

Following her pupils, and vainly endeavouring to keep within her grasp the smutty hand of a small fat boy, who persistently dragged her back, came Nina Nutting, looking rather as if she had gone to the wash and the soda had taken out her colour.

"We are after time," she exclaimed, in an agitated tone. "Oh, dear! how worrying if we should have missed them after all."

"No, there is a steamer coming," replied Gertrude, "and I believe I see them in it. Yes, there is your sister Henny, Miss Nutting. Don't you see her, with Miss Ann behind pushing her forward? Now they are merged in the crowd, but you will make them all out again in a minute."

Gertrude's prophecy was fulfilled, for in a few seconds the party they were awaiting proceeded to make themselves so conspicuous as to attract the attention of even those by-standers who were not naturally interested in their disembarkation. The peculiarity which marked them out from their fellow-voyagers was that one of their number was refusing strenuously to cross the narrow gangway to the pier, a feat which her com-

panions vainly urged her to attempt. She was a middle-aged lady, with a pale face, grey dishevelled curls, and a pair of watery grey eyes, which wandered wildly round as though searching heaven and earth for some way of escape from her alarming predicament. Her general appearance was altogether frayed and mildewed, as if years ago she had been put aside in a damp cupboard and there the moth had got into her.

"Now, Henny, deary, it's really wrong of you not to shake off your feeling of nervousness," said the downright voice of a younger sister, a short, thick-set person of some five and thirty years, whose drab stuff gown was the fitting garb, as she expressed it, of a "young woman professing godliness." "Come, get your ticket out, or we shall be having an unpleasantness with the collector."

"Do you wish to go on to Greenwich, or Gravesend, and then all the way back again, Henerietta?" inquired, with ghastly pleasantry, a large-faced old lady in a light airy costume of yellow alpaca, and a felt hat, encompassed by a green gauze puggery, "for that's what it will come to if you go on like this. Lay hold of her hand, Ann, and let's have no more nonsense."

"Oh, Henny dear, don't grip hold of my flesh so tight. Remember, lovey, what dear Mr. Johnstone says, that we must fear nothing but what is wrong," pleaded Josephine, a minute florid maiden, whose

dwarfish stature had stamped on her eternal babyhood. She likewise seemed to be at dissolving-point, and her head-dress consisted but of a frisette and a few strained hairs.

"But we are not to tempt Providence by running into danger, and what's more, I won't do it," and resisting like a dog who is being forced into a railway carriage, the now tearful lady held back, while one despairing sister essayed to draw her across the plank, and the other expostulated with the impatient official.

"We shall lose our dinner," exclaimed Ann, with a throe of anguish. "Muzza, speak to Henny, do; and get her over, somehow!"

Thus adjured, the mother turned to her eldest hope, and desired her so sternly to "make no more bones about it, but to come this instant," that yielding at length to the influence of the maternal mind, and shutting her eyes tight to exclude every glimpse of the gulf beneath, the affrighted spinster suffered herself to be led across the board, and ascended the flight of steps beyond, under a hail of sardonic witticisms from the ticket collector.

"Well," said Muzza, with a short laugh, "here you are, you see, my dear, safe on *terra-firma*, and all that fuss might have been spared."

"No, Muzzie, I'm sure I'm nothing of the kind. I never do feel safe in this nasty

London; and as for those planks, they are downright wicked."

"De-ar Hen-Hen, it's all right now, isn't it?" murmured little Josephine, and, regardless of a coldly criticising public, she lovingly buried her cheek in her elder sister's silk cape.

"I'm sure I hope it is, petty, but—wherever is that bit of crochet of yours? If it should be stolen! I'm sure I trembled for it when I saw that bold-looking woman standing so close to you in the boat."

"I've pinned it with the marker safe inside my petticoat pocket," replied Josephine, reassuringly. "I only hope the dear Archdeacon and Mrs. Egerton will not be offended at my offering them such trifles."

"I wonder whether Ninnie will come down to dinner with us to-day," said Ann. "She always refuses to go into company of a Friday. I sometimes wonder when I'm in Wimpole Street whether I am not wrong to sit down with so many people fasting. Praise heaven my religion don't consist in meats and drinks and fleshy ordinances!"

"Now, Ann," said Miss Henrietta, plaintively, "don't you be casting stones at poor dear Nin. You have been changeable enough yourself, I'm sure, and I always say any religion is better than none," and here she glanced reproachfully at Muzza, a lady whose grimly depressed air seemed to imply that



she had neither agreed with the world nor the world with her.

She was the widow of a gentleman who had gone the round of half the trades and professions by which gentility can respectably support itself, and having found all alike losing concerns, had at last stuck fast in a speculative cattle insurance company, in whose vast ruin he had duly borne his puny part.

This roving life had engendered in Mrs. Nutting an appetite for change, which she had gratified by making in person the circuit of the various sects and connections which diversify the level of British Protestantism, and having found each in turn wanting, she was now on the point of founding a new church, which should teach the gospel according to herself, in all its fulness of condemnation. The heat happily rendering her averse to controversy she contented herself on the present occasion, as she mopped her forehead with her handkerchief, with reminding her anxious daughter that "the Bible, and the Bible only, is the religion of Protestants!" and that she must put her best leg foremost if she did not want to find Mrs. Egerton's beautiful hot dinner quite spoiled.

Ann, who had been stopping to gaze with true British stolidity, mouth and eyes wide open, at a Punch and Judy show, started forward at this reminder, and the whole party

were mending their pace when a playful titter was heard, and Nina springing forward barred their progress with outstretched arms.

"You bad, naughty creatures," she cried, "we were determined not to show ourselves till you turned to look for us, and here you are on the point of running off and leaving us in the lurch. Oh, gracious, Joey! stop her," for Miss Henrietta was hurrying on blindly, all unconscious of her sister's pause. Happily, Gertrude, who was a little to the front, grasped the exigencies of the situation, and capturing the runaway in full career succeeded in restoring her to the bosom of her family.

"And is that dear Arthur?" quavered Miss Henny, trying to impress a kiss on the unwilling cheek of the small fat urchin.

"Arthur! Oh, Henny, how you do muddle things up," said Ann, with horrified reproach. "Why, dear Arthur was taken to glory more than two years ago. Don't you remember the lovely letters Ninnie wrote us about him?"

"I'm sure I beg your pardon! I'm still so fretty and confused with the turn I've had coming off that steamboat that I mix them all up, you see."

"Can you really walk all the way to Wimpole Street, Miss Henrietta?" asked Geraldine. "Mamma said we were to be sure to take a cab if you were tired."

"Oh, thank you, my dear, I prefer my own legs to strange horses."

The party now went forward steadily enough, Muzza marching on first in solitary state, like a gander before a flock of geese. Happily their arrival was not late enough to spoil the "beautiful hot dinner" which the hungry pedestrians had been so anxiously anticipating. It was a pleasure to Mrs. Egerton to see their beaming faces around her social board, and the enjoyment of Muzza and her daughters of such solid luxuries as hot roast beef and boiled chickens seemed in no way impaired either by the theological errors of their entertainers, or the sultry fierceness of the noon-day sun.

Miss Henrietta, like all feeble people, turned naturally to Mrs. Egerton for protection, and as she sat by that lady's side, resplendent in her state attire of a worn silk dress, a wisp of black lace fastened by a steel brooch about her faded throat, and a cap garlanded with decrepit rosebuds on her head, she poured forth profuse gratitude for her hostess's kindness in having asked her to luncheon, and apologies for having ventured to accept the invitation. The Archdeacon, at the bottom of the table, supported on either hand by Ann and Nina, looked round him with hospitable satisfaction. Mrs. Nutting, towering up in the centre with the lonely grandeur which belonged to her Ishmaelite ecclesiastical position, sustained,

without flinching, the immovable gaze of little George, who privately wondered why her grey hair had grown so brown since last he saw her.

"So here you are in the same house you had last year, Archdeacon," said Ann, settling herself with an appreciative smack of the lips to enjoy her plate of good strong soup.

"Yes, we are conservative people, and prefer old scenes to new in town or country. We are conveniently near to our favourite church also, Margaret Street is not ten minutes' walk from this house."

"All Saints' is very high, is it not, Archdeacon?"

"High as the Church is high, Miss Ann. We don't think quite alike on such points, you know."

"You consider the Establishment is high, then," inquired Ann, who always enjoyed an ecclesiastical discussion with Dr. Egerton. "Well, that was certainly exactly what one minister said. He thinks that the Prayer Book is as full of sacerdotal errors as an egg is of meat. 'Twas the first sermon I heard him preach after I left the Establishment, when I was staying with a young friend at Islington, the month before my conversion."

Dr. Egerton, slightly taken aback at the business-like manner in which Ann alluded to the secrets of her spiritual life, looked up at her with an expression of innocent amaze-

ment. Finding that he attempted no response she continued—

“Some of our own pastors even are getting high, as one might say. Lemon Street now, Mr. Johnson’s—they have an organ and coloured windows and a very handsome velveteen cloth and cushions for the table. Then last Good Friday, at the tea-meeting, some of us ladies clubbed together to present our minister with a silk gown and bands. He’s a university man ; I daresay you know him, Archdeacon, and has a deal of experimental piety.”

“These are hopeful signs now,” said the Archdeacon, abstractedly, and regarding his visitor’s communications from his own point of view. “It really does seem a movement in the right direction at last—a yearning awakening among these strayed sheep for the good old ways of the Church of their fathers.”

“For the white-robed choir and the Gregorian chant,” murmured Nina, raising her eyes from her leg of chicken to the ceiling, in impassioned contemplation.

“But you must not fall into the common mistake, my dear Miss Ann,” returned the Archdeacon, suddenly remembering with whom he spoke, “of supposing the whole difference between the Catholic Church and Nonconformity to consist in a few observances more or less. Our divergence lies

deeper. The handsomest cloth will not convert the table it covers into an altar any more than the silk gown you presented to Mr. Johnson, gratifying as the testimonial must have been to him, could convey to its wearer the succession of the priesthood."

"Oh, that's a thing he'd never wish!" cried Ann, with virtuous indignation, "he'd never play at being a *priest*. 'Twas an error of your Church to keep that word in the Prayer Book. Sometimes when I've sat listening to a good gospel sermon from the Low Church I've wondered to myself how they could put up with being called such names!"

"Ann, Ann, dear," interrupted Nina, turning upon her sister with an expression of agonized disapprobation, "how can you address the Archdeacon like that? He will think you so shockingly irreverent!"

An unusually severe reproof from the gentle Nina, but Ann's loud, uncompromising laughter showed that she was nothing discomposed.

"That's Ninnie all over—can't bear to hear the truth—stops her ears like a deaf adder!"

"It is you who err, not I," returned Nina, tremulously.

"Never mind," said the Archdeacon, in soothing accents. "Whether we agree with Miss Ann on these points or not, there are many things I am sure that we might learn

from her. If all Church-people did their duty among the poor and suffering as she does, this would be a happier world."

Nina, appalled by the laxity with which Dr. Egerton passed over her sister's heresies, subsided at this rebuke into mortified silence, and the pause which ensued enabled the three theologians to catch the complaining accents of Miss Henrietta, who, from her refuge under Mrs. Egerton's wing, was reverting to the old grievance of her mother's unsettled views. Muzza heard all from her central position, but maintained an immovable silence. She mentally compared herself to the eternal rock against which the fretful billows beat in vain.

"Have you any scheme for the afternoon's amusement, my dear?" asked the Arch-deacon, when at last his hungry guests appeared to be approaching satiety.

"Oh, they've all seen the British Museum!" answered his wife, in a tremor of apprehension. She liked archæology well enough when it meant wandering in old castles and ruined abbeys, but had dismal recollections of long afternoons dragged away in feigned attention to learned disquisitions on Egyptian tiles and Roman coins. "There are the Zoological Gardens, you know, or we might look in at Maskelyne and Cook's, if an indoor entertainment is not too hot for such an afternoon as this."

"Miss Ann has been telling me that she

has not seen Westminster Abbey for many years," said the Archdeacon.

"Never; since it fell into the hands of the Rationalists, that is," chimed in Ann, with sweeping condemnation."

"Well, the Abbey would certainly be beautifully cool, and later on we might look in at Westminster Hall, if our friends are so disposed. Let me see! we can pack five into the carriage, and the four others can have a cab. Say grace, George, and let us be gone."

The Archdeacon absently obeyed, calculating the while whether a hansom could not be made to do duty in place of the noisy four-wheeler proposed by his wife. Neither did Nina return thanks for her luncheon that day with her usual fervour of devotion. The pronunciation with which her mother and sisters rendered the first letter of their loudly expressed A-men tortured her sensitive ears—it was a true British "A," as decided and unambiguous as if they were about to rehearse the alphabet. In remonstrance she monotoned her own response, an act of defiance which brought an impassioned outburst to her mother's usually silent lips.

"I should have thought that in *my* presence you would have let that mummery alone for once, my girl!"

Nina refrained from retort, but inwardly made up her mind that the Fifth Commandment was the hardest of all to keep.




## CHAPTER IX.

His heart's his mouth ;  
What his breast forges that his tongue must vent.  
SHAKESPEARE.


THE Queen on her throne could not have felt prouder or happier than did little Josephine when seated in the archidiaconal brougham she leaned back among the purple cushions and rolled luxuriously along the teeming streets. To gaze with distant superiority on the expectant crowd which at the Regent's Circus awaited the coming of the 'bus—a crowd amongst whose jostling elbows she herself had been often wont to stand—to ride at ease compared with which the cabs she had habitually regarded as impossible luxuries appeared but shabby, rattling things, to feel that, having gone to her exact destination, she might at last dismount without being compelled to encroach on the small hoard of coppers in her pocket, this was bliss indeed ! From time to time the brougham stopped before drapers' and milliners' shops, where Mrs. Egerton issued orders, whose magnificent disregard of extra sixpences thrilled her with a wonder and delight, only transcended by the discovery that the parcels made up by the obsequious shopmen were to be divided between her sisters and herself.

The Egertons' house bore far and wide the reputation of being a kind of hospital for the poor, the maimed, and the halt of society—the guests they entertained by preference were those who enjoyed the fewest of fortune's smiles. One hitch occurred in the carrying out of the afternoon's programme, and one alone, the objection discovered by Mrs. Nutting at the last moment to enter any church dedicated to a human being. The Archdeacon, with a blank face, descending from his cab, made this fact known when the carriage stopped before the precincts of the old Royal Abbey. There was no help for it. Muzza was above argument. All the world, even her most casual acquaintances, found that out at once, and orders were accordingly issued that the coachman should go on to Westminster Hall.

The afternoon sun was shining brightly as the sightseers passed through the gilded palisades of the Parliament Houses. Ann, from a good-natured desire not to crowd her sisters and Mrs. Egerton, and also from a wholesome preference for fresh air, had insisted, in the face of all remonstrances, on perching herself upon the box, regardless of the outrage she thereby inflicted on the self-esteem of the respectable servants, between whom she had her seat. During the drive she had seized the opportunity of making some rather over-personal enquiries into their spiritual state, assuring them that, as in by-



gone days, there had been saints even in heathen Cæsar's household, so their praise might be in all the churches, as occupying a like honourable isolation in the bosom of a Ritualistic family. She had hardly finished her harangue when the carriage drew up, and she was obliged to descend and follow her companions into the vast cool Hall. The Archdeacon took up his stand in the doorway, the centre of an attentive auditory, and happily unconscious of the inconvenience he was inflicting on the passers-by, gave an historic lecture to all who would listen, sometimes turning so suddenly from side to side that it was a wonder the umbrella he carried longitudinally beneath his arm did not put out the eyes of the eagerly interested Misses Nutting. Geraldine stood a little in the back-ground, her eyes wandering abstractedly up and down the crowded Hall. She was looking vaguely—with secret longing, but with no tangible expectation that it would be gratified—for a face which for months past had haunted her with ceaseless and tantalizing persistency. Suddenly—for the moment she felt almost as if she were dreaming—she saw her secret vision take shape, and appear before her in flesh and blood. Yes, there it was, the pale, proud face with the melancholy eyes—the eyes that of old had moved her with such strange power, and which now, at the first glance, sent the blood leaping from her heart, and



thrilled her with a delicious sense of pleasure and excitement.

"Well, this is an unexpected rencontre!" exclaimed the Archdeacon, stopping short in the middle of an eloquent description of the Stuart Pretender's acceptance of the Dymoke's challenge, and turning round with a beaming smile. "My love, do you see our kind friend, Lord Rotherhame?"

"I am very happy to see you once more, Mrs. Egerton," said Lord Rotherhame warmly, and, as his eye fell on the bright, expectant faces of the two girls, he smiled upon them a peculiar, glowing smile. "What brings you all here this afternoon?" he asked. "Are you going to hear the debate?"

"No, indeed! We are merely wandering about seeing what is to be seen. St. Stephen's Chapel, they tell us, is not open to the public when the House is sitting."

"Any member can take you in. Will you make use of me, and perhaps when you have done the chapel you may some of you like to look into the House. The debate is on a Scotch ecclesiastical subject; they were getting rather hot over it when I came out, and people out of temper are always amusing."

"We should like nothing better if you can get us in without inconvenience. You see I am taking a party with me," she nodded significantly towards the Nuttings, "we are

making quite a holiday of it. I want to show them all I can."

Lord Rotherhame's eye, as she spoke, was resting with evident curiosity on the group of drab and brown females in the background, who returned his glance with an open stare.

"Is Mrs. Egerton giving her servants a treat to-day?" he inquired of Geraldine, as they moved slowly in the direction of St. Stephen's Chapel. "I remember her telling me that she sometimes brought them out sight-seeing with her. Your mother is the kindest person I have ever known."

"They are not our servants," whispered Geraldine, with an irrepressible chuckle. "They are our governess, Miss Nutting's mother and sisters. She will be struck with your power of discrimination when I tell her of your flattering supposition."

"Oh, no, you won't do that," he answered earnestly. "Do not expose my stupid blunder, and try to forget it yourself."

"I will, on condition that you retrieve your character for discernment by telling me to what religious persuasions they severally belong. Each has a different one, that much I forewarn you!"

"There is no Roman Catholic among them; I can see that," he answered, taking a critical survey of the group. "They are all British to the back-bone, and have nothing to do with the great spiritual Empire which

transcends all nationalities, and steals its subjects from every government in the world. Neither are they freethinkers, though that conclusion I form instinctively, and can give no reason for."

"That is a very negative description. Make it a little more definite before I consent to let you off."

"Your preceptress, then, I pronounce a Ritualist, because the day I lunched at the Rectory, in the avalanche of wit poured forth, the only joke that fetched her was one of the Doctor's, at the Bishops' expense. The frightened lady, with the unquiet eyes, swallows wholesale the last heresy she comes across, unless it be labelled 'error,' and, vaguely apprehending her lack of orthodox perception, is painfully conscious that she holds salvation on a precarious tenure. I cannot pretend to an insight into her special views on doctrine, for they are not the offspring of her own individuality, but the results of accident and circumstance. The older one in the yellow gown is first cousin to the Scotchwoman who, after coming to the conclusion that only she and her minister could obtain salvation, added, on second thoughts, 'And I'm nae sae sure about the meenuster.'"

"Yes," said Geraldine, "she thinks poor mamma quite beyond the pale, because she tries to be all things to all men, talks to her of the Millennium, to Miss Nutting of her

church embroidery, and to us about our dress and parties. Mamma objects in theory to balls and theatres and yet she is always the one who brings round my father to let us go to them."

"There is a divinity in some people's inconsistencies," said Lord Rotherhame, looking tenderly at Mrs. Egerton. "I can fancy how blackly some of our Protestant doctors, if they had been by, would have scowled upon the Christ when, instead of inflicting a horrified reproof upon the young Ruler who said 'All the Commandments have I kept from my youth up,' He beheld and loved him—recognising, no doubt, beneath the theological flaw, the guileless honesty of a simple heart. Here we are before the shrine of St. Stephen, and all the world and his wife is pushing in behind us."

"Why don't they take off their hats," said Geraldine, looking round her with blue astonished eyes.

"Because they are true John Bulls," he answered, smiling a little cynically. "They stand within one of the most beautiful oratories of Christendom, before a ready-vested altar, and yet not a hat is raised, not a voice lowered. In the House of Lords, in the presence of Her Majesty's throne, these same sight-seers would behave very differently. Every head would be uncovered, every sound hushed, except the respectful creaking of boots. It is not that the sense of reverence

does not exist among our people—they possess it, but in a crude, untutored form, and they have no æsthetic instinct to guide them in the place of knowledge.”

“I have always been madly patriotic,” said Geraldine mournfully, “but if my countrymen are really so dull, prosaic and commonplace as you seem to think them, I shall end by detesting the whole race.”

“Don’t say that, for I shouldn’t like to think that you detested me. I am growing dull and prosaic as I get old, you see, and have already come to call a spade a spade, and to abjure the poetic fallacy of looking on the world as a great, beautiful allegory of . . . what it is not. I cheerfully admit that the lightning is only so much electricity—I philosophically recognise the fact that the heaven’s blue is but an optical illusion, that the snow-capped mountain, whose peaks rise veiled in mystery, is after all but a rude mass of stone, rubble and frozen water. The dull green of the churchyard is to me the shroud of a still more prosaic fact; I have acquired courage even to take my best friends to pieces, pick out their weak points, and put them to the test of a cold, impartial judgment.”

“So that is what middle-age teaches one, is it?” said Geraldine, with an incredulous smile, “that everything bright and beautiful is a sham, and the dull and disagreeable alone realities. I do not like your views,



Lord Rotherhame—I think I would adopt one of the Nutting varieties in preference. What pleasure would it be to me to look up at the blue sky, if I could not picture a lovelier heaven behind it.”

“Is that all the respect you accord to the accumulated wisdom of my middle life? Time will take revenge on you; you will grow old and stupid too, and will be thrown aside like the rest of us, for younger feet to trample on.”

“I don’t dread losing my youth, not much that is,” she answered. “As a rule I feel drawn to older people. They seem so mellowed and chastened, as if the weathers and changes of fortune had taken all egotism and passion out of them and left them serene and sweet.” She paused and looked up thoughtfully at him. “I don’t think that you have quite”—she did not conclude the sentence.

“Quite attained the season of sweet serenity,” he answered laughing. “I had begun to feel so pleased with myself, and to hope that you were drawing your attractive portrait of an elderly gentleman from the life. I wonder whether you will come with your mother into the House, Miss Egerton,” he added abruptly, “I will go and persuade the Usher of the Black Rod to put as many seats as he can manage.”

He went away, and presently returning addressed himself to Mrs. Egerton. There

were places for four, and an eager discussion arose as to which of the party should occupy them. Mrs. Egerton was agreed to be a *sine quâ non*, and she at first suggested that her husband and the two elder Nuttings should listen to the debate and leave the young people to divert themselves by a climb up the Victoria Tower. Lord Rotherhame did not take kindly to this proposition.

"Your friends have not seen the pictures yet; I think," he whispered. "That is a far more important object to accomplish in a first visit to the House than hearing a debate."

"It is very naughty of you to plead for the girls," said Mrs. Egerton, "and I really can't leave my visitors to take care of themselves. Now *I* have often heard a debate before, and they have not, so pray take them in with Miss Ann Nutting, and I shall amuse myself very happily outside acting cicerone to her mother."

"Very nice for her," returned Lord Rotherhame, with an air of discontent, "but I think you would do better to let your friends settle the vexed question for themselves. I feel convinced that they are devoted to art, and will greatly prefer the pictures."


The disputed point was now referred to Muzza, who by her abrupt and unsociable manner had gained a reputation for far-sighted impartiality. But Muzza left the

difficulty pretty well where she found it by affirming, with her usual felicity of expression, that "she cared no more for art than she did for lords," and that "for her part she wanted no amusement, old things having passed away with her and all things become new."

"Nothing could be more satisfactory," said Lord Rotherhame aside to Mrs. Egerton. "You see you need no longer burden yourself with efforts for Mrs. Nutting's entertainment."

At this crisis Miss Henny interposed, declaring with evident sincerity that she would greatly prefer remaining outside with her sisters, and adding privately that "she was sure it would give her quite a turn to be called upon to face so many lords."

So it was finally settled that Ann Nutting should accompany Mrs. Egerton, the Archdeacon and Geraldine into the House. Geraldine felt in a blissful dream as she walked off through the Peers' Lobby, and swept by the obsequious policeman who guarded its entrance. But when she passed into the gilded Senate Hall, and realised that she was actually in the presence of that "High Court of Parliament" for which she had prayed every Sunday of her life, she forgot all other sensations in one of mingled delight and awe. There was a hushed sultry atmosphere in the Chamber, and the afternoon sunshine streaming in through the high



painted windows, fell upon the gilded throne and heavy crimson benches, and filled the drowsy air with golden dust. Lord Rotherhame stood behind Mrs. Egerton and Geraldine, and at intervals whispered amusing, rather sardonic biographies of the occupants of the benches. Geraldine poured forth question upon question, and encouraged by her eagerness, he became extraordinarily animated, and the two maintained such a ceaseless war of words that Mrs. Egerton herself could scarcely wedge in a sentence. Even the pleasure of listening in peace was denied her, for Ann Nutting on her other side tickled her ears with a ceaseless buzz of nothings.

The long golden afternoon wore imperceptibly away, and the sunbeams grew more slanting as the chimes boomed forth quarter after quarter in deep, melodious tones. One by one the Peers dropped out to refresh themselves in the Park, and when Lord Rotherhame had finished the few words which he had consented laughingly to speak at Geraldine's request, it was past six o'clock, and Mrs. Egerton whispered to her daughter that they too must be going.

Geraldine sighed, but feeling as if she had had really as much happiness as she could well digest, rose submissively, and, preceded by Lord Rotherhame, left the House.

They rapidly passed through business-like Committee Rooms, where learned looking

gentlemen were chatting on red leather benches, and where Geraldine had the pleasure of beholding a worn-out Minister nodding off the fatigues of the previous night's debate, to the broad terrace, where the river air blew freshly, and the Nuttings, in attitudes of luxurious repose, were comforting their hearts with peppermint lozenges. Miss Henrietta had been getting very low at the prolonged absence of her protectress, and hailed her return with rapture. Mrs. Egerton, with her customary rather indiscriminating benevolence, offered Lord Rotherham's arm for her support, and, having linked the reluctant pair together, drove them off in triumph, regardless of Miss Henny's querulous, almost tearful, protestations that "she would, indeed, much rather not." The Archdeacon now rejoined the party from his place in the House, very hot and sleepy, and hardly equal to resisting the generous efforts with which Ann sought to press the whole remainder of her peppermints upon him.

"There, do take 'em, do have 'em all, Archdeacon!" she cried. "They're so warming internally, and really t'will be quite a favour to rid me of them, for they make my pocket so sticky, and keep on melting and messing my tracts. Just now when I took out one to give to a young man—one of the Parliament, I believe, who we met in the way—two or three stuck together, and he got 'em all. However, I hope they may be of

profit to him, and then I shan't grudge 'em."

The Archdeacon, anxious to stop this public feasting, hastily accepted the obnoxious packet, and thrust it into his pocket. Mrs. Nutting, however, secretly displeased with Ann's lavish prodigality, and hoping that she might move the Archdeacon to refund a portion of the treasure, observed warningly—

"Unwholesome things, very! The few I've taken have turned me already quite sick and bad."

A remark of any kind from the severe and taciturn Muzza, was felt to be so exceptional a condescension that the Archdeacon was bestirring himself to take it up with adequate gratitude, when Ann interposed with some heat—

"I'm sure, Muzza, you couldn't find purer pops anywhere than those. I *know* they are to be depended on, for I bought them of an old believer in Albert Row, who keeps a rag and bone shop, and sits regularly Sabbath after Sabbath under Mr. Johnson."

This description did not tend particularly to reassure the Archdeacon, but he wisely kept his feelings to himself, and as they had by this time regained Westminster Hall, he consigned his children to Mrs. Nutting's protection, and drove off with his wife to pay some calls in the Cloisters.

A short consultation now took place be-

tween Mrs. Nutting, Ann and Nina, as to the manner in which they should fulfil the duty assigned them of conveying the party home, and as Muzza, left pay-mistress, ruled that the hire of two cabs would be an unjustifiable waste of money, it was finally agreed that they should 'bus' to the Circus, and thence walk home to Wimpole Street. In accordance with this plan, Mrs. Nutting hailed the first omnibus that appeared, and the two Egertons had the mortification of being wedged in between a private of the Line and a stout female in waterproof, while Lord Rotherhame stood by, looking on in consternation. He had, on first discovery of Mrs. Nutting's purpose, attempted a remonstrance, urging heat, risk of infection, and other objections, but Muzza paid no heed to him, and Geraldine preferred submission to a public struggle with the ruling mind. So Lord Rotherhame handed her in, and following came Miss Henny, forced by Ann past the many opposing knees that checked her progress, and ejaculating "Thank you, sir," with deep humility to all who made way for her. The crowd within was so dense that Ann again wished to mount up outside and enjoy the evening breeze, but Lord Rotherhame gravely negatived the idea, and she was obliged to push in and take her seat on Miss Nutting's hospitable knee. All being comfortably settled, Lord Rotherhame jumped on the step, and ignoring the exasperated

glances of the conductor, shook hands with such of the party as he could reach.

"I have never asked after Lady Lettice," said Geraldine, leaning forward as he prepared to descend, "you can't think how we enjoyed the afternoon we spent with her at Rotherhame."

"The children are not tired of talking of it yet," he answered; "you will come and see them, I hope, one of these days."

Geraldine accepted warmly, and was again saying good-bye, when a sudden thought struck him, and he began again.

"By the way, why should you not come and stay with them while your father and mother are in the country? Mrs. Egerton told me she was going out of town, and if you will spend the time of their absence with us, Lettice will be delighted. She shall send you a formal invitation."

Geraldine's face grew radiant, but before she had time to speak a word, a poke from the conductor roused Lord Rotherhame to a sense of the impropriety of keeping a public equipage waiting, and nearly choked by the atmosphere of stale straw and bad tobacco exhaling from the interior of the "bus," he dropped down laughing, and took his way towards the Park.



## CHAPTER X.

This is the pomp that strips the homeless orphan.

THE Archidiaconal brougham was turning the corner of St. Jerome's Square, and Geraldine with her beloved Dawson, once her nurse and now her maid, was anticipating her arrival at the strange big house with too beating a heart to feel altogether happy. She was not used to going about the world by herself, and her old unaccountable shyness of Lord Rotherhame had, since their last meeting, returned in double force upon her. The first glow of delight which Lettice's invitation had excited had passed off, and at the moment of arrival her predominant sensation was one of nervous constraint.

Gertrude had that morning accompanied her parents into Kent. Harriet, the youngest sister, had gone off blissfully with her governess to Battersea to fetch the Nuttings home *en masse*, Mrs. Egerton, in the bounty of her heart, having invited them to spend the time of her absence with their sister.

Little George and Harriet were in ecstasies at the prospect, and to consummate the happiness of the Nuttings, Muzza, who felt no natural attraction towards the house of feasting, announced her intention of remaining quietly in Albert Street while her girls

went visiting, a decision which no one cared to combat.

The carriage pulled up before the door of a spacious red-brick mansion of the Georgian era, and the servant's knock was promptly answered by a stout butler with a vista of bewigged footmen in his rear. Geraldine alighted, and felt disagreeably friendless and undefended as she stood solitary before these lofty and impassive personages. She cast a longing eye at Dawson, but Dawson, with her company face on, was confidentialising with the butler about her boxes, and preparing to follow him to some snug region underground. There was no help for it, and Geraldine turned away with a sigh from the last bit of home that was left to her, and followed the footman across a hall paved in squares of blue and white marble, and up a wide staircase of polished oak, to the drawing-room. There was a kind of palatial grandeur about this room, an impressive stateliness in the formal arrangement of satin chairs and ottomans, the coved ceiling with its maze of floating goddesses, the sumptuous specimens of Sevres china, Indian carving, and oil painting which adorned the cabinets and walls. Five tall windows looked out on a shady garden, and standing in one of these she saw before her four squares of smoke-dried lawn, divided by paths of powdered shell, dotted here and there with stone vases and grimy-looking statues, and

enlivened by beds of glowing summer flowers. At no great distance the Towers of Westminster rose above the tree tops, airy and slender, towards the sapphire heaven.

The door opened, and Miss Oliver, in a state of flutter that set all her ringlets shaking, trotted in to bid her welcome.

"My dear Miss Egerton," she cried, "I am come as an ambassador from Lady Lettice, who is quite conscious that it is sadly against the bien-séances for anyone but herself to receive you, but she, poor dear, is just now with her singing master. Signor Salvini will leave in ten minutes and then she will be free; this I was to tell you with her kind love. I hope you will overlook my representing your young friend."

"Indeed yes, Miss Oliver," replied Geraldine, when the old lady's volubility slackened for a moment. "I am so very glad to see you again."

"How kind of you to say so! And I cannot express to you how pleased I am that the dear girls are to enjoy your society for a while. Would you believe it—pray sit down my dear—you are the first lady-visitor that has slept in the house since their beloved mamma died, indeed, I might say since their grandmamma was taken, and that is now, you know, five years ago."

"It seems strange," said Geraldine, "but it must be partly their own fault. Their *father* would surely never refuse to let them

invite their own friends if he thought they cared about it."

"Well, perhaps not," answered Miss Oliver, "but, you know, Miss Egerton," she lowered her voice confidentially, "his Lordship, like other gentlemen, has his—ahem!—peculiarities! I am one, I am sure, that would make ample allowance for the anxious and delicate position of any gentleman who has a large family to bring up, and no mamma to superintend, and I think often things would have been very different had it pleased Providence to spare dear Lady Rotherhame. Lord Rotherhame has been quite an altered man, Miss Geraldine, quite an altered man, since he lost her, and he really seems to get worse and worse about opening his house to friends. It is such a pity, for as the Dowager Duchess of Naseby said to me only last week, 'Miss Oliver,' she said, 'how are those girls to make themselves amusing in society when their tongues have been allowed to rust from their cradles? Why,' her Grace concluded, 'at the present moment they can hardly say boh to a goose.'"

Geraldine professed sympathetic commiseration.

"But you have Mr. Robert Bogle at present to enliven you, I hear. Lord Rotherhame told us that he was reading with Lord Berkeley. What can he impart, I wonder, that Lord Berkeley does not know already?"

"I don't know, I am sure," said Miss

Oliver, piteously, "but you see Mr. Bogle goes with him to lectures and walks with him, and they take their meals together, for we—I regret to say—see very little of the poor dear boy. Well! you'll find out soon enough for yourself, but it is as well you should be prepared. The truth is, Miss Egerton, that things are not so smooth as they once were between Berkeley and his papa. Whether it is that his Lordship is over anxious and expects too much, or perhaps does not quite understand that you cannot put an old head on young shoulders, I can't say, but things are not so pleasant as they were. You must not fidget about it, and must take as little notice as possible, my dear."

Geraldine looked mystified, but promised. The old lady had seemed really anxious and unhappy as she made the appeal, but no interested questions could induce her to launch out into closer particulars.

"Robert Bogle is a most objectionable young man," Geraldine resumed. "I should not think either Lord Berkeley or his sisters much enjoyed his company."

"He is not so nice as he might be," said Miss Oliver, decidedly.

"A shade worse than his father," suggested Geraldine.

"O dear, I don't think there is any comparison between the two. The Doctor has a funny manner, but the kindest heart that ever beat, and the truest, I do believe."

Geraldine stared, but seeing that she had somehow committed herself, hypocritically declared that she had been thinking of the Doctor's personal appearance rather than of his moral qualities, a polite falsehood which did not altogether effect its object of restoring Miss Oliver's tranquillity.

The even tenor of the conversation being thus disturbed, Miss Oliver had leisure to look at the clock, and found that the last ten minutes of the singing lesson had slipped away. Requesting the young guest to follow her, she accordingly led her up stairs to the cheerful schoolroom, where the girls were assembling for a six o'clock tea. Their eager looks and universal attitude of expectation showed plainly that this arrival of a visitor was a great and rare event in their tranquil lives. Lettice's shake-hands was warmer than many an embrace, and even the nursery children had obtained leave to come down, and stood by in their white frocks and blue sashes peeping up at Geraldine with large, wondering eyes. Their tongues were not unloosed until the nurse, taking their little hands, led them off to be undressed; when both with one accord lifted up their baby voices in entreaty that she would come and kiss them in their beds.

"A lady did that once, ma'am," said the nurse, a kind-looking, grey-haired woman, turning to Geraldine. "Mrs. Griffith, her Grace the Duchess's 'manuensis, and her

ladyship has never forgotten it, and always said that if ever a lady came here to stay again, she'd make her do the like. But I tell her she can't expect ladies to be running up to the top of the house just for her pleasure and Master Eddy's."

"But I should like to of all things," said Geraldine; "I will be sure to come."

And reassured by this promise, the little pair again took hold of the nurse's hands and trotted slowly from the room.

Schoolroom tea at the round table with hot cake and strawberries as condiments, and the balmy air pouring in through the open window, was a repast to encourage social freedom, and to banish all trace of shyness. A ceaseless chatter was maintained by the girls throughout the meal. Geraldine felt herself a little old with these childish beings, as though her greater knowledge of life gave her a superiority of several years even over Lettice; but their beauty and gentleness charmed her, and she was not too advanced in the scale of being to despise Philippa's suggestion that after tea they should go into the garden and play "I spy."

"O, this dreadful evening!" exclaimed Lettice, with a shudder. "Don't you pity me, Miss Egerton? I have to preside at a big dinner party, and then entertain more than a hundred people in the evening. What on earth am I to say to them? It is the first time I have had to go through such an

ordeal, for until now I have always made it an excuse that I would wait till I was presented."

"I do pity you," said Geraldine, thinking secretly what a slip of a girl she looked to be at the head of a great establishment. "You got on very well though, I remember, at your Tenants' Ball last Christmas. You are not quite without experience."

"Even then I made one dreadful blunder. Papa has never ceased to tease me about my cruel treatment of Mrs. Thompson. But what I dread above all to-night is that Aunt Bessie will be here. She is my grandmother's sister; while I was in the schoolroom she always came to act hostess at our big parties, and she is certain to keep her eyes on me the whole evening, and turn all I say and do into ridicule."

"I'm sure I trust her Grace will have no occasion to do that," murmured the duenna, in an anguished aside.

"This dinner was arranged before we knew you were coming," continued Lettice, handing Geraldine a pencilled list of the expected guests, "or we would have made Aunt Bessie keep a place for you. You are out, are you not?"

"I am afraid not, exactly," she answered regretfully.

"Anyhow, I wish you could have come into the drawing-room in the evening; I



should not feel half so forlorn if you were with me."

Geraldine's eyes sparkled. The dinner list which she had been studying contained names which excited her keen interest—names of public men, both literary and political, whose characters and opinions she had heard constantly canvassed by her father and his friends. A longing came over her to obtain a glimpse of the great London world, to know by experience something of its fascinations. This would be no ordinary gathering of common-place people who lived in the same neighbourhood, who had grown up, and would wither into antiquities together; it would be an assembly in which she could study society in its ideal form, in which talent, beauty, wit, high-breeding, and enthusiasm would combine to charm her with their brilliant glamour. And then she would neither be solitary nor friendless; Lettice and her father would be there to protect her. She paid scant heed to Miss Oliver's horrified remonstrances on the preposterous notion of a young lady stealing into the world by the back door, so to speak, instead of gliding into it under the smile of Royalty, and accepted Lettice's invitation after a hurried mental survey of her evening dresses.

When tea was over, and Lettice dressing for dinner, Geraldine ascended to the darkened chamber in which the two little children awaited her. She liked to sit upon

their beds, to feel their round, warm arms about her; to hear their innocent prattle, and stroke their soft, fluffy heads. Were they not *his* children, his own flesh and blood, and could she not discern his likeness on their faces? She talked and played with them long, unable to tear herself away; and in the subdued twilight, the little pair gradually lost all coyness, and went into peals of silvery laughter.

"Have you dot a mother?" asked Cicely, at last, looking grave as she stood up in her nightdress with Geraldine's arm round her.

"Yes, I have. Don't you remember that lady who came to see you last winter in the country, and played tunes to you on the guitar?"

"I me-remember. Eddy, shall we tell her our secret?"

Edward, from a neighbouring crib, nodded an affirmative. Then Cicely began again, in solemn tones—

"Once—you musn't tell anybody—we had a mother too. She's dead now, and gone to live in the sun. We mustn't talk loud about her as she's dead. But isn't it naughty of Miss Oliver? Sometimes she speaks about her when she's laughing."

"You mustn't mind that, sweet thing," said Geraldine, struck with horror that the little ones should look on death with such pagan terror. "Good people, when they die, are happy in heaven, with the blessed angels."

They are alive, and talk and laugh together, just as we do, only they are far, far happier. You ought to talk about your mother just the same as you do about each other."

Cicely looked thoughtful, but after a moment's pause, shook her golden head decidedly.

"No, we mustn't do that," she said. "We never speak of our mother to anybody hardly, only sometimes, when father comes up to kiss us, and nurse is gone, and we are quite alone, he tells us about her in a whisper."

Geraldine kissed the little angel-face, and felt the tears rising to her eyes. It was keen pain to her sympathetic heart to look through these childish revelations into the soul whose sorrows were studiously hidden from the world.

"Good-night, my pets," she said. "I will come and see you again to-morrow night."

## CHAPTER XI.

Meanwhile the day sinks fast, the sun is set,  
And in the lighted hall the guests are met ;  
The beautiful look lovelier in the light  
Of love, and admiration, and delight  
Reflected from a thousand hearts and eyes,  
Kindling a momentary Paradise.

SHELLEY.

THERE was a pleasant peculiarity about Geraldine's bedchamber, a light iron staircase, overgrown by white roses and purple clematis, led straight down from her balcony to the lawn beneath. Dressed in her best for her *début* in the London world, she leaned against its flower-wreathed rail and drank in the perfumed evening air. It could hardly be called cool—not a breath was stirring—and yet the stillness and absence of glare were a true and most welcome refreshment. The dark trees were motionless, as if too tired to wave; an amber brightness lingered softly in the western heaven, in whose liquid sea the keen and tremulous brilliancy of the evening star dawned suddenly, like the coming of a spirit. A reviving darkness crept along the grass, and rising, became gradually more diffused as it neared the silent sky. Summer lightning, broad and slow, quivered ceaselessly on the horizon, and the scent of mignonette and heliotrope feasted the senses. But for her

white shoes she would fain have opened the little iron gate, and gone down into the garden. But this fancy lasted scarce a moment—the next her heart pulsated with excitement at the prospect of her coming introduction into that Vanity Fair, whose perilous witcheries had formed the text of so many parental homilies. A little nervous, but exquisitely happy, she descended, pausing one moment by the staircase window to see the carriages stopping at the door, and beauteous apparitions in lace and satin daintily mounting the carpeted steps, while policemen kept off the rabble on either hand. The drawing-room doors were flung wide open, and within she caught sight of a moving mass—a rainbow maze of splendid dresses and flashing jewels. It seemed a formidable thing to venture in alone among this throng of strangers, and she lingered timidly. Standing on the black oak stairs, tall and fair, in her white dress, pure flowers and shining pearls, she made a pretty picture, and it was a pity that no one should have benefited by the sight. But the ladies in the hall were all too busy pulling off their wraps to heed her, and at the first notice from a footman, who casually looked round, she moved forward with an air of modest diffidence towards the drawing-room, and launched her light bark on the unknown ocean of society. Drawing on one side, out of the way of incoming guests, she looked

about her. The folding doors between the two large drawing-rooms were open, and she saw a long vista of gilding, mirrors and painting, closed by what looked like a vision of the tropics, for within the glass doors, palms and orange trees, bananas and tall ferns, stood grouped in sweet and stately silence. She saw also a crowd of faces all unknown, and heard a confused Babel of talk and laughter. Among all the great company her eye could find out no acquaintance with whom she could exchange a sentence. Her heart sank as she realised her isolation. It was a nervous, awkward thing to have to stand, a solitary unit, the only silent and unheeded being among those gay and social groups. She looked out anxiously for Lord Rotherhame, but he was nowhere to be seen. Lettice she discovered after a while, seated on a sofa, small, cool, and grave, a vivacious-looking old lady by her side, and before her a circle of admiring young men. Thus surrounded, Geraldine dared not approach her. Never mind, she felt sure that Lettice would soon find her out, and introduce her to some one at least of her many visitors. In the meantime there was plenty going on around with which she could amuse herself. She sat down, began to look about her, and for the first half-hour was fairly content. But, at last, the old feeling of isolation returned in double force. It was difficult to appear at ease, and as if smilingly absorbed by an agree-

able train of thought, while on one hand a young matron was carrying on an elaborate flirtation with an attentive gentleman, and on the other, two grand young ladies were whispering laughing confidences into each other's ears—hard to sustain the curious glances which were cast upon her, and which seemed to grow contemptuous as time passed on, and still no one drew near to claim her recognition. Every one else was meeting friends, every one else had reminiscences to talk over, plans to arrange, common acquaintances to discuss. She was alone, marked out for the odious pity of such bystanders as honoured her with any notice at all. People who had left her in that place half an hour ago, came back in their cycles, and found her there still; and she was painfully aware that no one in the room had seen her hold communication with any living soul. Her self-consciousness grew with morbid rapidity, till she began to feel that any action would be preferable to the passive discomfort she had been enduring; and starting up with a transient sense of relief, she sought a new retreat. But when found, the old faces were still surrounding her—the faces that at the lower end of the room had witnessed her forlornness. She looked about her in despair, then got up once more and walked on, trying to appear as if bent on some definite quest. Suddenly her eye encountered a familiar visage, one which she had never dreamt she

could recognise with pleasure. It belonged to Lord Fitzcharles, and in the sudden relief of meeting an acquaintance, she acted on the impulse of the moment, held out her hand, and greeted him by name.

Lord Fitzcharles turned and looked her full in the face. He did more! He looked at her from the crown of her head down to the soles of her feet, and all the way up again. Then he proceeded to look over her head, and without taking her extended hand, passed on, bending the while to murmur something in the ear of the haughty-looking young lady who was walking by his side. The lady turned her plumed head, glanced at the speechless girl, and then Geraldine heard a suppressed laugh, and caught the whispered words—

“That was really *too* cruel of you.”

Geraldine stood as if paralysed. She glanced guiltily about her, and it seemed to her wounded pride as if of the many who, surrounding, had ignored her, not one but had witnessed the insult. She was not fiercely indignant with Lord Fitzcharles now, as she had been at Rotherhame, she was too cowed and miserable for that. But a cold pallor came over her face, and she felt as if she would gladly have sunk into the earth. She stole away into a deep window recess, behind the shelter of a big table. It was a shelter, and yet it set a brand upon her. She was no longer, even in outward appearance,



making one of the company beyond. But mortification was to reach her, even in this her chosen refuge. In less than five minutes she saw Lord Rotherhame take up his position at a few yards' distance from her. She had not sufficient spirit to find pleasure even in the sight of him, and the fact that his grave manner was laid aside, and the habitual melancholy of his face changed into a graceful and vivacious brightness, seemed to remove him yet further from her. He was talking to the pretty old lady who sat by Lettice, and it was not long before the sound of her own name, spoken softly but distinctly, caught her ear.

"Papa, when you can find time, will you talk a little to my friend, Miss Egerton? I see she is sitting by herself, and I fear she does not know many of the people."

The answer was inaudible, but Geraldine bitterly concluded it to be a putting off of the ill-timed request, and this suspicion was confirmed by his drawing up a chair, and seating himself by the side of the old lady, with whom he was soon engrossed in merry conversation.

It is the last drop that makes the cup run over. Geraldine's heart was full to brimming, and when, at this crowning mortification, the vision rose before her mind's eye of Gertrude, gay and light-hearted, in the drawing-room of Saltstone Lodge, petted by her parents, the centre of a circle of admir-

ing friends; when—more cruel contrast still—she thought of the party in the house in Wimpole Street, Nina Nutting and her family drawing their chairs together for a comfortable after-supper chat, her tears could no longer be suppressed. First her eyes swam, next the heavy drops rolled out upon her cheeks. She bent her head, and surreptitiously lifting her handkerchief, made believe attentively to scrutinise the Sèvres china basket that stood on the table before her.

“The second time I have seen you weeping,” said a voice at her side, whose sweet, peculiar tenor roused her with a sudden thrill.

She lifted her frightened eyes, and saw dimly a smiling face.

“How d’ye do?” she faltered, scarcely able to control her voice to speak, and wildly winking her wet lashes.

Lord Rotherhame took her hand, and looked into her face with a protracted and embarrassing scrutiny.

“Come, I must investigate this,” he said, in a semi-bantering tone. “I hope it is not a very deep heart-grief. Were you missed out when they carried round the ices, or is your conscience pricking you about your stolen entrance into the world?”

Geraldine had all the acute sensitiveness of inexperienced youth, and she had suffered too much to be healed by a joke. She smiled,

however, a slow smile of returning animation, and answered—

“Nothing is the matter except, perhaps—that I feel a little tired.”

He looked at her again, and this time still more closely.

“I shall make an authoritative demand to know the truth shortly,” he said, at last, “as soon as I can get you to myself, away from all this mob. I am in *loco parentis* to you now, Miss Egerton, and expect to find you good and tractable. Will you come with me? I want to introduce you to the Duchess of Naseby, the old lady who is sitting by Lettice on the sofa. She is particularly anxious to know you.”

Geraldine, feeling by this time as if she had well nigh lost the use of her tongue, shrank back nervously. But he paid no heed to her open reluctance, and pushing aside the table to let her pass, led the way towards the sofa. The young men who were paying court to Lettice, and who seemed to find the lovely young girl a goddess difficult of approach, made way for their host, glancing meanwhile with curious eyes at the tall, crestfallen young lady who followed him. Geraldine, in truth, pale and dispirited, was hardly to be identified with the brilliant, smiling girl who, scarce an hour before, had entered the drawing-room full of eager anticipation. The Duchess stopped in the middle of her talk with the loquacious Colonel who was leaning

over the back of her sofa, fixed her eyes with merciless scrutiny on the downcast face of the new-comer, and for a moment there was an interested silence.

The Duchess of Naseby—last bearer of that august title—was a small woman, with big, lively, light blue eyes, and hair of a pale chestnut colour, trained in little curls about her forehead, after the fashion of a French marquise of the 18th century. Her reputation for breeding was so high that she could dispense at will with the ordinary social rules laid down for the less distinguished majority, enjoyed the privilege of using bad grammar when she pleased, staring people out of countenance, and running her critical eye up and down the figures of ladies presented to her, without waiting for an opportunity to do so unobserved. She was great enough to be good-natured, made no higher demands on life or human nature than that they should afford her amusement, and might say things of questionable refinement without shocking anybody. She called most people of her own sex “my dear,” and had the taste to appreciate modesty and goodness whenever she came across them.

“How d’ye do, my dear?” she said, examining Geraldine meanwhile from top to toe with an exhaustive stare, which brought a new flush to the unlucky girl’s cheek, and made her acutely conscious of the tear-stains about her eyes. “I hope they are taking

care of you, and that you are enjoying yourself."

"I thank your Grace," answered Geraldine, unwilling to sully her conscience by what would have been a lie of no common magnitude.

The guarded answer of Lord Rotherhame's new *protégée*, who was obviously suffering from an excess of shyness, was made with a stately formality which rather roused her Grace's curiosity. She raised her brows, and once more scrutinized Geraldine's downcast face, uttering meanwhile a significant "Dear me!" which she by no means troubled herself to make inaudible.

A stout, solemn-looking woman, the Marchioness of Downwood, was sitting on the Duchess's left hand. She was the very cream of orthodoxy; had a pet clergyman who haunted her drawing-room like a lap dog, and who, in return for unfailing subserviency in the week, was permitted on the Sabbath to re-echo her ladyship's sentiments back in her face from the pulpit of a May Fair proprietary chapel. Lady Downwood had been discussing with the Duchess the new appointment to the See of Dunchester of a colonial bishop suspected of ritualistic leanings. Too full of her grievance to waste any thoughts on Geraldine, she now reverted once more to the well-worn theme. There could be no doubt of the truth of the scandal; the Prime Minister had himself been her in-

formant at an "at home" that afternoon, and she had not hesitated to speak her mind to him.

"Poor man!" broke in the Duchess, laughing. "Give him a chance, Fanny! Admit him to one of your own coteries, and see if that don't convert him! It's a grand mistake to ostracise a heretic. The Popes might have turned the Protestant fathers themselves into inquisitors if, instead of putting them to the rack, they had asked them to dine in the private apartments of the Vatican. Pray are you High Church or Low Church, my dear?" she concluded, turning with appalling suddenness on Geraldine, who was still standing shyly by her side, uncertain whether to go or stay.

"I think I am rather High Church?" she replied, politely softening her confession out of consideration for Lady Downwood, who was scowling in anticipation.

"No need to blush about it!" said the Duchess. "For my part, I am for letting every one take their own way, worship the sun if they please, or anything else that happens to suit their fancy. One of my daughters believes in Irving—not the actor, the clergyman, of course!—and imagines herself an archangel—an opinion, I fear, not generally shared—at all events, I found it very hard to get her settled in life, didn't I, Fanny? My youngest child, Lady Alchester, is High Church, goes to confession, and to church

three or four times a day, and takes notes of the thin-faced curate's sermons. I go my own way, enjoy my services at Maurice's on a Sunday, and leave her to live in the vestry if she pleases."

"Shocking!" snarled Lady Downwood, with uncharitable alacrity, and looking unutterable things at Geraldine.

"Now then," interposed Lord Rotherhame, whose watchful eye detected that his guest was not yet feeling at her ease, "if your Grace will excuse us, this young lady and I have a little business to transact together. Let me show you the conservatory, Miss Egerton, where we can talk undisturbed, away from all this racket."

Geraldine smiled more cheerfully, and bidding farewell to the Duchess with a ceremonious bend, walked off with her host towards the conservatory. How protected she felt by his side! how impervious now to the glances which a short time since had cut like knives! The conservatory, as she passed out of the crowded reception rooms, seemed a very paradise of cool, refreshing darkness. It was like an Eastern night, voluptuous and fragrant, coloured lamps sparkling like stars through a network of gigantic ferns and tropical trees, a fountain dripping close at hand, and the air laden with intoxicating sweetness. Here and there some fairy light lit up the indistinct outline of a tall ambrosial blossom, or a golden orange shone out

of its glossy bower of leaves, like the sun through a forest glade. Violin-music was beginning without—a maddening operatic air—and the amazing rise and fall of its surging passion made Geraldine feel as though she had fallen asleep, and were dreaming an Arabian night's dream. Lord Rotherham found her a solitary seat, hidden from view by the drooping foliage of an immense exotic, and dropped down by her side.

"You don't mind leaving all those people for a bit, I hope?" he said.

"Oh, no; I am delighted. I can fancy myself in the tropics here—the beautiful sun-haunted side of the world that I have never seen. To complete the illusion, there should be parrots flashing from branch to branch, and monkeys chattering above our heads."

Lord Rotherham looked pleased. The change of scene had cheered her, as he had hoped.

"We want a missionary also," he said, "in an enormous palm-leaf hat, flourishing vigorously away at a row of mystified, woolly-headed natives. But I think we came here for another purpose than to talk about the tropics."

Geraldine was silent.

"Something has happened to distress you, and my honour as host is impugned," he continued seriously. "I have the right to demand an explanation."

"If I were to tell you, you would not un-



derstand," she replied. "You would only think me fanciful and silly."

It had occurred to her that it would not be playing a very gracious part to complain to him of his guests, or to admit that she had passed a miserable evening in his house.

Lord Rotherhame perceived her hesitation.

"I shall have no peace till I know what has gone wrong," he said gently. "You will not refuse to tell me, will you?"

"Well, then," she answered, feeling impelled to yield, she knew not why, "to begin with, I felt shy and strange, and secondly, I was stupid enough to speak to a gentleman who did not care to recognise me."

"Who cut you? Nonsense! You must have been mistaken, unless, indeed"—and breaking off abruptly he added, as if a sudden idea had struck him—"this *gentleman*, as you are polite enough to call my guest—this insolent, underbred churl, as I prefer to term him—was it Lord Fitzcharles?"

Geraldine's spirits rose, and she could not repress a laugh.

"You have guessed right; I daresay it was stupid of me, but in the first instant of recognising him I had no time to reflect."

"You held out your hand, and he?"—

"Stared me full in the face, then looked over my head, and completed my moral castigation by calling the attention of the lady who was with him to my humiliated condi-

ion. She was kind enough to pity me, and was of opinion that Lord Fitzcharles had been 'rather too cruel!'"

This was said a little spitefully, for Geraldine's pride had been sorely wounded.

Lord Rotherhame uttered an expletive—a thing rare with him.

"Stay here a moment," he said, rising. "I will take leave to ask my Lord Fitzcharles on what plea he thinks himself justified in insulting a lady in my house."

"Oh, no, *please* don't! You cannot think how uncomfortable it would make me. Remember, I never should have told you if I had not thought my secret safe with you. I should be ashamed to seem to attach so much importance to what Lord Fitzcharles may choose to do."

"As you will; though when I think it is the second time that fellow's vulgarity has annoyed you under my roof, I feel it would be a satisfaction either to show him the door or to bring him hat in hand to make his apologies. By the way, you will not form a very high estimate of my choice of friends! What will you say when I tell you that, except for my old aunt, who pays periodical visits to see that the little girls turn out their toes and keep some outward varnish of civilization, the only outsiders that have slept under my roof for years are Lord Fitzcharles and Mr. Robert Bogle!"

"And myself," concluded Geraldine, laugh-

ing. "I am proud to make the third in such a trio."

"It is rather a funny medley," he said, laughing also, "but I was not reckoning my children's visitors, or the character of my list would have been raised by the addition of my boy's friend, young Murray-Carr."

"Our house," said Geraldine, "is a fourth the size of this, and it is always crammed. Our one difficulty is a lack of rooms. It seems strange to me that you, who have the space we want, should turn it to so little account."

"If the spare space in this house were filled, they would have also to fill the vacancy caused by my absence."

"That is stranger still. Just now I remarked you looking the gayest of the gay. I am certain you talked faster and laughed more than any one else in the room. You did not look to me like a misanthrope then."

"Because when I have the ill luck to be in society, I prefer the most unnatural effort to being a dead weight upon it. It would be fatal to all chance of amusement, if people in social assemblies confessed by their faces how dead-alive and bored they felt at heart. The plan is followed by some, I know, who think it refined to sit gaping at one another like a flock of expiring ducks, but, for my part, I think such kill-joys ought to be ostracised."

"Yes, and that proves that unselfishness is the fundamental social virtue. The miserable ought, when they are in the presence of others, to hide their misery for other's sakes."

"Undoubtedly! our dirty linen should be washed at home."

"You hit *me* very hard," said Geraldine pathetically, "but I assure you I fought against showing my feelings as long as possible, until my lips were quite tired of smiling at nothing. But do not think that I often make myself so ridiculous as to cry in public. Why, I heard of the death of one of my uncles the other day—a very nice one too—and never shed a tear."

"That speaks badly for you. A little personal mortification moves you more than the awful solemnity of a kinsman's death."

"Well, it does sound horribly selfish," said Geraldine, answering his smile. "I did feel sorry though—very—and wished my tears would come, and remembered with shame how readily they made their appearance when once I had been pondering over my own death-bed, and picturing to myself the agony of my relations."

"Well then, since we are agreed that in spite of the unlimited amount of humbug it involves, unselfishness is the cardinal social virtue, and since you by your confession stand convicted of the opposite vice, I will offer you a bit of practical counsel. Follow my

example, and lead a hermit's life of well-occupied seclusion."

Geraldine felt a little distressed. Did he then really credit her with being guilty beyond the ordinary of that most odious of faults?

"But I do fight against it a good deal at times," she felt herself compelled to assert, in vindication of her impugned character. "Faults are not overcome in a day—I am already less selfish than I was a year ago."

"But you know, if you were really unselfish," he persisted, "you would be glad to feel that you had done something to make my party pass off pleasantly. The sufferings of a feeble and unprotected girl are as much a godsend to the *blasé habitués* of society, as a bit of carrion to a flock of hawks. At all events," he added, changing his tone and speaking softly, "you should not have let them make you cry. Pure tears from an uncorrupted heart should be reserved for the sins and woes of the world, not wasted on the snarling annoyance of its puppies. All my nonsense apart however, Miss Egerton, I am sincere in my hope that you will keep yourself clear from such a jostling crowd of dreary inanities as at this moment infest my house. I fear that the world may hurt you, not you the world."

"And yet living too much alone must be bad for any one. One would get in such a hopeless groove, and grow self-conscious and

awkward into the bargain—one's tongue rusting from sheer disuse. Miss Oliver is unhappy because your daughters are so shy that they never care to go out. Is not that the fault of the hermit-life you recommend?"

"I know she thinks so. I have had to listen to homilies innumerable, both from her and from my Aunt Bessie. I dare say what they tell me is true enough, but you know 'a man convinced against his will, is of the same opinion still,' and somehow all their unanswerable arguments leave me as far as ever from the hospitable ambition of persuading my acquaintances to come and amuse themselves in my despite at my expense. For another thing," he continued after a moment's pause, "I am anxious that the children should grow up with simple habits and frugal tastes. Fortune is capricious! one day they may perhaps taste poverty—I may die, and their brother may quarrel with them and turn them out of doors, or my bankers may fail, or the agricultural interest go down."

Geraldine laughed.

"You do look far ahead indeed. But on the other hand you debar them from all chance of providing for themselves by matrimony. Mr. Murray-Carr and Mr. Bogle are after all little better than Hobson's choice."

"Why should they marry? I am so little inclined to act the pedlar, and go into the matrimonial market to advertise my wares, that, on the contrary, I take care to keep off

interested suitors by making known far and wide that my daughters will be pretty nearly portionless."

Geraldine was not learned in money matters, but this announcement struck her as implying something rather terrible.

"Poor things!" she exclaimed, "what will they do? Even spinsters brought up frugally cannot live on air."

"I don't mean quite to let them starve, poor little creatures," he answered, smiling. "They are mine, and I am bound to give them the means of keeping body and soul together. But they shan't have enough to allure husbands. If they are to be married at all, it shall be for the sake of their sweet faces and gentle hearts. You see, with such views, I have no alternative but to accustom them to live simply. And I have another reason. There is an infectious complaint about in the world—by name vulgarity—which I should be sorry to see them take."

"That is true," said Geraldine, remembering Lord Fitzcharles.

She was surprised at the ease with which conversation, leaving ordinary topics and entering into a more personal channel, flowed between her and this man who, despite his youthful vivacity, was so much older than herself, and had eyes which in their wise sadness looked as though they had beheld the bright rise and mournful fall of lives in other spheres. It seemed when she talked

with him as if the ice which spreads its conventional surface over the natures of casual acquaintances melted, and she could see the dark soul-waters roll beneath.

Lord Rotherhame was happy also. His was a peculiar unassimilative nature, and it was not often that he found a companion who would listen to him with such receptive comprehension as this bright girl.

"Do you know," he said reflectively, "that you inherit from your mother a very dangerous gift?—socially speaking that is—as we are on the theme of society."

"What?" she asked curiously. There was a strange fascination in finding herself the object of his speculation. "Happily it can be nothing bad if I derive it from my mother."

"A delicate, sympathetic instinct is a social gift of most perilous sweetness, Miss Egerton; perilous, in what it entails on its possessor. See what has come of it! We came here for the express purpose of talking about you, and your concerns, and lo!—I have unconsciously been enticed away—and now wake to find that our talk has turned wholly upon myself. However, on this occasion I will not apologise. One is privileged to be egotistical with one's *friends*, and our friendship, you know, was a settled thing seven months ago—in witness whereof I appeal to your given ring."

Geraldine blushed with pleasure.



"Oh, Lord Rotherhame, I *did* hope you had forgotten all about that stupid old ring! How could I have been so foolish as to fancy that that could make up to you for the loss of your lovely goblet?"

"Do you think I *could* forget that you had promised to be my friend?" There was a pause. Then he turned to her and said suddenly:

"To be with you is like gazing into the deep blue sky!"

The red light of a coloured lamp was shining full on her eyes as she looked up at him, and he saw in them a kindling glow of glad surprise. He suddenly grew cold.

"One of these days," he added hastily, "you must ask your old friend to your wedding breakfast, and try if he cannot make you prettier compliments then."

"You will have long to wait, Lord Rotherhame," she returned with an imperceptible rise of dignity. "The person is yet unborn for whom I would leave my sisters and my parents."

"You are followed, Miss Egerton," said Lord Rotherhame, at this moment glad to change the subject. "Here comes a gentleman who is not inclined to follow Lord Fitzcharles' bad example, and who, by the panting and snorting that mark his approach, might be a rhinoceros breaking into Eden."

As he finished speaking Robert Bogle appeared, his big face peering in at Geraldine

and her companion through a white profusion of orange blossom. He brought a message from the Duchess requesting her nephew's return, and scarcely waited for his Lordship to turn his back before he greedily snapped up his vacated seat, and proceeded to entertain Miss Egerton, as long as she would listen, with second-hand criticisms of the opera and depreciations of the Academy.

Lord Rotherhame's return, with an attaché of the Austrian Embassy, delivered her at last from her predicament, and from that time forward she was so surrounded by admirers that Robert found it impossible to get near her, and after an hour, brilliant enough to compensate for her earlier period of penance and ennui, she retired to bed, with her brain in a whirl of pleasurable excitement.

4

## CHAPTER XII.

Hours which pale passion loves!  
Midnight walks, when all the fowls  
Are safely housed, save bats and owls.

FLETCHER.

To bed, but not to sleep.

The lights, the darkness, the rippling fountain, the witching music of the evening had entered into her blood, and their sweet intoxication pursued her even into the silence of her shrouded chamber. Dawson was gone, the candles were extinguished, her usual half-hour of wakeful meditation passed, and still her brain was alive with an almost painful intensity. Again and again the words which had entered her ears that evening repeated themselves in her imagination, and eyes—grave, sweet eyes—haunted her, reappearing here, there, and everywhere in the whirling coil of thought, and converting the fragmentary history into a lucid poem. Conscious that she would suffer in the morning from these hours of abnormal wakefulness, she made from time to time duteous efforts to compose herself to slumber. But closed lids will not shut out images from the inward vision, and at last, after many a tossing to and fro, she abandoned the fruitless effort in despair, and springing out of bed drew up her blinds and looked out into the night. A

world lay stretched before her, so wondrously fair that it seemed a sin that millions of eyes should remain shut, while a picture of such entrancing loveliness had been painted on sky and earth by the Creator's hands—an ephemeral picture, whose pallid tints the gaudy glare of morning must obliterate. But the beautiful universe is not created for man's enjoyment only, and sunlit glades in lonely woods, and the play of waters in sea-washed caves, and the ethereal blue of sky and ocean round palm-grown desert isles, rejoice the Soul of the unseen Divinity and His bright spirits of the air. This was a night on which those who were privileged to look, might feel themselves specially elected to share their God's delight. But Geraldine, whose veins were thrilling with a strange new passion, found in the fair scene nothing but what she herself brought to it—excitement, rapture, love.

The air was sultry, the moon—Night's Venus queen—sat enthroned, as a goddess expecting homage. A myriad stars flashed in the vast dark dome, ever and anon hiding their sparkle behind a voluptuous veil of moon-bathed cloud. A whisper—softer than silence—stirred the rich foliage, and drew forth the fragrance of rose and magnolia, as a lover's kiss at eventide a maiden's happy blush. The great City was asleep. For one hour, noise, vulgar strife, the driving toil of bread-winning, the world's turmoil, had ceased.

Smoky houses, vomiting chimneys, blackened spires, were idealised into beauty by the gentle hand of the enchantress Night, and earth and heaven owned the empire of loveliness alone.

Geraldine turned back into her room. It was stifling and oppressive. Why linger within four contracted walls while the large empty garden, with no roof but the far sky-dome, lay seducingly before her? No one would see—the walks were haunted by moonbeams alone, and guarded by odorous beds of flowers. A great longing seized her to bathe her brows in the balmy midnight air, to cool her feet upon the dewy turf. Scents innumerable seemed to call her forth, and every leaf to murmur blame of her delay. Groping her way to the chair where Dawson had arranged her clothes she dressed hurriedly, and then with her long auburn tresses hanging abundantly about her, slipped out into the balcony and glided down the steps into the garden.

Her thoughts themselves seemed fresher here, and the words, which ever since she had been alone had jangled with ceaseless confusion in her ears, came back blended into harmony. "To be in your presence is like gazing into the deep blue sky." Perchance the same wizard that had enchanted grim ugly London into a fairy city, was at work to throw an unreal glamour over those few unpremeditated words.

aldine recognised this possibility, owned herself that the advent of healthful, sober morning might put to flight this dream, the other fleeting phantoms of the night ; but, even so, it was a sweet dream, worth indulging while it lasted. Was she altogether unreasonable ? was she nothing more than the dupe of an attack of midnight madness ? Might not the cold, careless speech which had followed on those thrilling words but give larger significance to the spontaneous outburst which they had been intended to explain away ? At all events dull calculation should not vex her soul to-night. For once—if for once only—she would give herself up to enjoy, to love, and live. She wandered hither and thither, to this place and to that, drunk with enjoyment, gathering wet flowers as she went, and only intervals disturbed by the uneasy recollection that her midnight ramble was unusual and unauthorized. Happily no one would ever be the wiser—the shutters of the great park house were fast, its inmates asleep, and there need not limit the period of her enjoyment. At last, however, her distance from the altar—she was at the very end of the garden—struck her with a new fear. She was of an imaginative temperament, and visions of ghosts and housebreakers assailed her with a rush. Fixing her eyes on the great clock at Westminster, whose round face gave her a sense of protection as of some

watchful policeman, keeping guard over the silent streets, she began to retrace her steps. Her fancy took alarm; every dark bush seemed beset with terrors; the light rustling of the foliage and the distant miauling of cats made her shudder, and she wished herself safe in the secure refuge of the great four-post bed.

Too late, too late! for—oh, that she had gone in earlier, or never indulged this foolish whim at all!—a dark shadow fell sharply across the white path, and Geraldine, with a wildly beating heart, stooped low behind the lilac bushes, prepared, if need be, to throw herself upon the mercy of the advancing burglar. The next moment relieved her fear of violence to plunge her into another kind of alarm. The intruder was Lord Rotherhame. What would he think of her? To be thus wandering out of doors alone at three o'clock in the morning; how should she account to him for such a breach of conventional propriety? And he had, in all probability, come out for solitary thought, and would look on her presence as an annoying interruption. She was hesitating whether to accost him at once, or to chance detection from her dark corner by the lilac bushes, when suddenly she saw him stop.

The moonlight fell brightly on his upturned face, and showed it changed and sad. He sat down on a bench close to her, so close that she might have touched him, and, leaning his

head upon his hand, muttered wearily to himself—

I could lie down like a tired child,  
And weep away this life of care  
Which I have borne, and yet must bear!

She felt guilty, ashamed to have been an involuntary spy upon his privacy. She feared to reveal herself, feared yet more to continue listening. Suddenly taking her resolve, and allowing herself no time for vacillation, she sprang to her feet, and said in a rather shaking voice—

“Lord Rotherhame, don’t take me for a ghost! It is I, Geraldine Egerton.”

“You, Miss Egerton?”

He spoke in deep, startled tones, and then was silent. It seemed an effort to him to resume his customary manner on such short notice.

“Yes, I was too hot to sleep, and there are steps, you know, leading from my balcony to the ground. I could not resist the attraction of the cool garden.”

“For years past,” he answered, having by this time to some extent recovered his composure, “I have wandered at night in this garden—for I hold it a sin to miss such hours as these—and I have never yet met a creature. The inmates of my house are of too prosaic a nature to prefer moonlight to feather beds. I profit by these occasions to keep up the poems I learnt in my boyhood,” he added,



with a forced smile. "Did you hear me just now, hard at work on Shelley? I hope you don't think me very sentimental!"

"Oh, no, it is a very good thing to do," said Geraldine deceitfully, and then fearing that her conscious manner was betraying her, she added: "I am too fond of poetry myself to think you sentimental. I love to see those vague shadows which haunt one's brain, flying from one as the twilight flies from the sun, given substance, and made to stand before one clothed and embodied."

"It is a lucky thing though that people cannot always put their inmost feelings into print," he returned, with a faint laugh. "In this age of publicity, sorrow and sin, weakness and love, are each in turn made capital of to bring in bank notes, and glut the fancy of a sensational generation. If God did not set an angel before the gates with the sword of incapacity in his hand, not a human soul but would forthwith open its holy place to the violation of the mob."

"But words of peace and comfort can never be called desecration," said Geraldine, a little timidly. "Surely it is God Who calls poets to tread where no common feet dare enter, and to make sorrow itself seem lovely by the magic of their melodious utterance."

"Yes, there are times when the tension of our nature would be too great to be endured might it not relieve itself by speech, and so to keep the great heart of mankind from

bursting, poets are inspired from age to age to utter the unutterable. It must be an exhausting process to lose one's inmost virtue for the healing of the world! Shakespeare alone appears to have been equal to the task. He pours out his thoughts on the most awful and sublime themes as if they were the waves of an inexhaustible ocean, and then, unwearied, can throw limitless energy into the comedy of human life."

"He must have been the greatest of poets!" said Geraldine.

"The greatest of men," returned Lord Rotherhame, enthusiastically, "the Apostles themselves not excepted! I do not mean, of course, that their mission was not more lofty, that they did not rise to sublimer heights of heroism than he; but, apart from supernatural grace, Nature seems to have gifted his mind with a splendor never equalled. He was a sun pouring forth light and life with royal profusion; kind to all human weaknesses, benevolent, comprehending, joyous. A sunny nature is, to my mind, the thing most to be admired on earth, by the law of contrasts, I suppose."

"But to-night I don't feel the least in the mood for the great glaring sun, however useful and good-natured he may be," said Geraldine. "He seems coarse at this hour by comparison with the peaceful loveliness of the pale, pure moon."

"A false peace and purity, Miss Egerton!

She is not the fair virgin queen you fondly imagine her, the holy protectress of innocent maidenhood, but a wicked, hypocritical old witch, in the secret of all the crimes and follies that have been committed since the world was young."

"Hypocritical? Well, I can forgive her, for her illusions are at least artistic. She idealises the commonplace, and throws round the dreariest scene a silver halo of romance."

"She is the patron of thieves, nay, a thief herself, for her very light is stolen. She is the evil enchantress whose poisonous smile works lunacy, whose siren voice excites to passion. Hers is a frightful face when the fair, false mask is lifted. Volcano and earthquake have torn it, chasms deep as hell lurk near her heart, intolerable cold and furnace heat wreak on her their opposing extremes of torment, the lack of atmosphere shuts her from holy light in the horrors of eternal darkness. To my mind her sinister influence over the human race, together with her persistent attendance upon our planet, leads to the idea that in her lies that Gehenna—that Place of Torment—where men and women undergo the punishment of their evil deeds on earth. Strange that, in spite of all astronomers' facts, mankind continues to lavish on his evil enemy the soft language of sentiment and passion, and that it has been left to the instinct of faithful dogs—the truest friends of our race—to warn us by their

howls that the queen we worship is false and wicked to the heart's core."

"She is a real queen, all the same," said Geraldine, speaking more quickly than was her wont, for they were nearing the house, and the enchanting moments were almost fled. "She acts upon me, now that I have been so long in her presence, with a delicious excitement, and makes me feel alive and glad, as if I walked on air."

"You look like Undine might have looked when she awoke and found the woman's soul within her!" said Lord Rotherhame, glancing with sudden admiration on her kindling face, in which the eyes seemed to have grown larger, and to shine with a dangerous and beautiful brightness. "You have something of an Eastern in you—beauty, music, poetry, act on you like wine."

They stood at the foot of the steps that led to the balcony, and the scent of white roses breathed through the hot, still air.

Geraldine lingered one moment before she left him.

"You have done all you could to scare me from my paradise," she said, "give me one pleasant thought to sleep upon, that I may not dream of the burning, ruined world, and the sulphurous flames from its black chasms."

"Think of Love then—you, who are young and fair—love that intoxicates the soul, and changes the sluggish blood to quickening fire—blessed, bewildering, blinding Love!"

Geraldine trembled all over—trembled with the violence of some new and marvellous emotion. Lord Rotherhame perceived the passionate shining of her eyes, and a sudden pallor crept over his face. But something of the agitation of her soul seemed magnetically to pass to his, and though he repented with a quick and strong repentance the mad words which had escaped him, he knew not how, he could do no more to cancel their effect than to take her hand and say “Good-night.”

Almost unconsciously her fingers rested in his, and happy in their touch, she lived in the bliss of the moment. Suddenly a window was thrown open above their heads, and a voice broke on her ears with a discordant harshness which awoke her as from a trance.

“Who are you, I should like to know, perambulating the garden at this hour of night?”

“It is young Bogle,” whispered Lord Rotherhame, with a sudden movement placing himself before her, and speaking in accents of unlimited disgust. “He has half the household at his back, to judge by the boldness of his tone. Go in, Miss Egerton. Make haste ! they will be firing at you for a burglar.”

Geraldine needed no further admonition, but sprang noiselessly up the steps. There was no reason why she should wish to make a secret of her nocturnal encounter with her host, but the last few sentences they had ex-

changed made her feel as if it were something she would rather not reveal.

"Who is it?" reiterated meantime the voice of Robert, waxing more confident now that he had detected a feminine figure. "Are any of you maids out there? I'll trouble you for your names, that your master may know of your shameful goings on. I don't intend to have my sleep disturbed by your chattering, that I can tell you."

"Stop that noise, pray, Bogle; you will wake the whole house!" cried Lord Rotherhame, in a tone made imperious by vexation.

"Lord Rotherhame!" was the astonished answer. "I beg your pardon; I heard voices, and thought that some of the servants must be out."

"Of course not! How could they get out of the house?" And then, concluding that Robert had in all probability seen Geraldine, and thinking it best to speak the simple truth, he added, "I have just discovered Miss Egerton in the garden. She made her escape by the balcony steps, and has very foolishly been walking about on the soaking grass. It will be a wonder if she is not laid up with a cold to-morrow."

"Geraldine out of doors now? What a naughty little vagabond it is!" returned Robert tenderly.

Perhaps the moon was witch enough to be infusing sentiment even into him!

"Well, I have got her to go in now. Don't

“speak of it to the children, or they will be wanting to play the same trick. I am not coming in just yet, so don’t fire at me if you hear footsteps again. Good-night.”

“Good-night, Lord Rotherhame.”

Robert shut his window, and silence once more settled on the house.

## CHAPTER XIII.

I roam beneath the ancient trees,  
And talk with him of mysteries.  
The dull brick houses of the Square,  
The bustle of the thoroughfare,  
The sounds, the sights, the crush of men  
Are present, but forgotten then.

C. MACKAY.

is a beautiful thing to be young—to come  
in the nursery of life to its festival hall  
and banquet high and splendid ! Body and  
mind have been prepared for the transition  
years of training and repression. At last  
the strong young self can no longer be held  
in check ; it bursts the chrysalis, spreads its  
wings, and darts upwards to the sun. Physi-  
cally and mentally the powers approach  
their zenith ; the cup of vigour is so full that  
much will suffice to make it overflow, and  
the wasting process begin which ends be-  
neath the turf. The world into which the  
new butterfly emerges is bright ; the  
wisdoms of experience are but as the sombre  
background, whose darkness throws into  
proper relief the loveliness of a smiling  
landscape. And as the lips, hitherto accus-  
tomed to the milk of simple pastimes, quaff  
boldly the goblet of pleasure and passion,  
the young heart has no suspicion that the  
red fiery draught will spoil the palate for  
the pure aliment of childhood's meek repast.




Brought into the hothouse, the wild primrose will droop for lack of the green dell which was its cradle, and never again will it lift its head till beneath the snows of age it peeps forth once more, the shadow of its former self, and sheds its petals on—a grave.

Her walk in the moonlit garden had marked the opening of a new era in Geraldine's existence. It was as if she had for years been climbing a high hill, too busy gathering flowers upon the way to look up and measure the height she had yet to scale. And now, unawares, she had reached its summit, and could see stretched around her a vast and glorious panorama. The pleasures and interests of the old home life already began to lose their flavour; she had passed from them into a world of new emotions, and the sun whose presence made its day, and whose absence was its night, was he whom she had come to love. Happily the disparity of their years kept her from looking, as she might otherwise have done, to marriage as the natural goal of her desires, and when she had been able to bring the subject to the test of sober judgment, she accepted as the fiat of inevitable destiny the conviction that the tie between herself and Lord Rotherham must be the tie of friendship—platonic friendship—and nothing more. With that she ought in all conscience to be satisfied. He was her hero, and it should be pride and satisfaction enough to possess him as her


friend. No conventionality, no false shame, no unkind criticism need ever disturb the peace of a friendship founded on affinity of nature and mutual comprehension. And thus it came that, living in the belief of boundless possibilities of future communion, and strong in the confidence of ignorance, Geraldine suffered no cloud to shadow the enjoyment of her present, and day by day needed more and drank deeper of the stimulant she mistook for nourishment. Conscious she was that her intercourse with her friend, which, while she was in his presence, appeared to flow so gaily and so easily, oppressed her moments of solitude with a sense of exhaustion, and that sleep and appetite were losing power. But buoyed up by the deceitful fever of excitement, she troubled herself with no dull anxieties, nor did she anticipate the cold and sure reaction of the future.

Meanwhile Lord Rotherhame, secure in the integrity of his own heart's devotion to the dead, —despite the admiration which he could not but accord to any one so lovely—laughing to scorn the suspicion which would sometimes faintly suggest itself, that he could by any possibility trouble the peace of his daughter's friend, deluded also by the old story of platonic friendship, felt that it would be gratuitous and ridiculous to deny himself the rare chance of enjoyment offered by intercourse with a sweet and comprehending mind.



After the dead solitude of the last five years—a solitude which since his estrangement from his son had known no kind of relief—it was a luxury to have a companion who could understand him. She seemed to respond instinctively to each inner mood of his mind; she did not call him soberly to account for every rash theory promulgated in the mere perversity of fancy; he knew he did not bore her. And so, in the intervals of leisure allowed by business and society, Lord Rotherhame and Geraldine met constantly and talked—talk which had never time to flag, and which flowed out at the first moment of mental contact, prompt and free as the waters from the rock at the touch of Moses' rod. One blot it seemed to her there was upon this life of constant enjoyment, one single blot—the silent, mournful presence of young Berkeley.

All the sunniness and sweetness seemed to have died out of him; he never, to her knowledge, volunteered a remark, and on the few occasions when he made one of the family party, endured the fun and chatter that went on around him with an air of patient weariness. He had been struggling for six long months to win back his father's heart—the heart which he admitted had been justly estranged—and now seemed further than ever from the attainment of his object. In fact Lord Rotherhame, who at first had satirized and mortified his rebel from a



bitter lust of vengeance, had formed a habit not easy to break off. Had Ralph retained the energy to speak out, and by open reproaches melt the ice which was freezing them up in mutual enmity, all might have come right. But he had lost heart for everything but passive endurance, and Lord Rotherhame, seeing him grow daily more dull and irresponsible, came to fancy that he had as little feeling as he showed, and in their intercourse mixed harshness more and more largely with contempt. To Ralph, sensitive and proud, pining for the love in whose atmosphere he had been nurtured, this treatment was little better than moral murder.

Divining something of what was passing between father and son, and witnessing the insolent tyranny exercised by Robert Bogle in his capacity of tutor, Geraldine during the first days of her visit warmly espoused Ralph's cause, and made frequent efforts to show him kindness, but his languor and taciturnity baffled her. Somehow she thought he did not seem well-disposed towards her. At times, when she talked with his father, he would watch them with a vigilance which had in it something sinister, suspicious. She would catch a glimpse of his face in the midst of her merriment, and it was ominous, boding, like the writing on the wall at Belshazzar's feast.

Could it be that he was jealous of her ?

Impossible ! And yet she gradually abandoned the efforts which met with such chill response, and grew to associate him with ideas of gloom and discomfort. She scarcely wondered that his bright, cultured father should find small pleasure in his society, and yet it distressed her to see the look which Lord Rotherhame's face assumed when his eye by chance lighted on his son—a look that made it not less handsome, but far less good.

It was a gorgeous July afternoon. Lettice was indoors with her Italian master, and Geraldine was in the garden lying in an easy chair beneath the shade of a spreading lime. To this retreat the fierce outer blaze of blue and gold could not penetrate, but she could see its splendour through the scented foliage of her tree, and also disjointed bits of blistered lawn, and mosaic beds of geranium, calceolaria, and heliotrope. Book in hand, she lay with half-closed eyes, listening idly to the sweet chimes that clanged every quarter from the Clock Tower, and scarcely marking whether she slept or waked. As the afternoon wore on, a change crept imperceptibly over the sky, and she roused herself to find that clouds were coming up from all parts of the horizon, like a murderous phalanx closing round a doomed band ; clouds murky, sulphurous, and threatening, whose sombre shadow dulled the bright hues of the garden, and made the air heavy. A shiver ran

through the torpid leaves, and the birds, as if they had heard a whisper of coming danger, forsook their frail shelter, and skimmed the ground with uneasy twitterings. The sudden cooling of the air was portentous rather than refreshing; it seemed as if the heat had flown upwards from the earth to hold council with its brother elements, before returning with inflamed resentment to overwhelm and burn.

"Hullo, Geraldine! snoozing as usual?" exclaimed a voice close in her ear, and looking up, she perceived with dismay that Robert had discovered her retreat. "What a one you are for hiding yourself away! Didn't I tell you I should be out by five, and we'd have a two-handed game of croquet?"

"I have been asleep, I think," she answered languidly, "and now it is too late to play. Lady Lettice will have finished her lesson, and I am going to sing with her."

"Like a pair of love-birds! Dear me! I wish you girls could make yourselves happy without getting hold of bosom friends and hanging on their arms and buzzing secrets in their ears. It's awfully tantalizing to us gentlemen, you know, but I suppose that's just what you coquettes do it for."

"I wish you would not persist in calling me a coquette, Robert, and fathering notions on me that never entered my head."

"Oh, sweet innocence!" laughed Robert. "But it's of no use for you to be going in

now, for the Duchess—nasty, poisonous old cat!—(her Grace had on various occasions contrived to make Mr. Bogle feel small)—drove up to the door five minutes ago and she's looking at the children's teeth, I believe, or examining them in the etiquette book. She won't want outsiders."

Geraldine reseated herself reluctantly. She could not outrage civility so far as to forge an immediate pretext for escape.

"There comes the Earl!" cried Robert, in a tone of annoyance, "and Berkeley with him, too, by all that's sacred! I hope they won't come poking their noses in here, but if they do, you'll stop on with me after they're gone, won't you? I've something *very* particular to say to you."

Geraldine made a faint assent, and her face brightened as Lord Rotherhame, lifting the heavy branches, peered into her retreat.

"Berkeley told me of your hiding-place, Miss Egerton," he said. "Won't you come and take one turn round the garden before I go down to the House?"

She sprang up eagerly, and only half saw the wry face that Robert made, as, raising her hand to protect her hatless head from the fierce rays of the sun, she hastened to join her friend.

"Shall I fetch a parasol?" he asked. "You will be fretting about your complexion if I don't, and that will spoil our talk."

"Don't fear," she answered laughing. "I

resigned my complexion to its fate years ago, when mamma told me that to preserve it I must give up eating honey."

"That was a child's short-sightedness," he said, "a woman would not have so frittered away beauty—her most prized gift."

"Ah, real beauty would have been worth giving up honey for," she answered smiling.

"I am not so sure though that people are not better off without it," he rejoined musngly. "Bodily ugliness often saves the soul from being deformed into crooked divergence from the pure and lofty outlines of moral loveliness. Ardently as I worship beauty, I abhor the most splendidly moulded face from which a mean and conceited soul looks forth. Ugliness is most forcibly exposed by contrast—a base spirit would seem less repulsive in a body whose untrue lines corresponded with its own serpent twistings, than in a temple of stately mould and beautiful design."

"And a refined bright soul can shed true beauty over the most ill-formed face," said Geraldine, "it is like June sunshine glorifying a dull ploughed field. The contrast does not aggravate the evil, but only touches one with a tender sadness."

"Do you not sometimes long," he asked, "to have been born in a world where all was lovely, where the perfection of art would blend harmoniously with the perfection of nature, where the ear would be soothed by musical



sounds, the nerves by balmy air, the senses by the ceaseless fragrance of flowers, the moral nature by contact with true and poetic souls."

"I am afraid I should find such unvarying exquisiteness a little tame," replied Geraldine. "I love variety and strong contrasts. Summer would not be so dear to me, if behind its radiant skirts, I could not catch a glimpse of crabbed old Winter blowing his windy horn through a whirl of storm and snow. Catholicism would not seem so imperial if it was not the heir of a hundred savage Pagan creeds, if simple, sullen Puritanism did not set up its plain cottage-front to throw out the grandeur of its spiritual palace, if Broad Churchism did not sometimes freshen up its dim, incense-laden air with cheerful, easy-going heresies. Pretty things would surfeit if not mixed with things grim and fantastic; plain porridge keeps sugar from palling. Beauty itself seems to me a less divine gift than humour—humour, the salt of life, which cannot lose its savour."

"It is pleasant enough to go in for contrasts when we know they will be useful to show up our own good looks," he answered laughing. "You would not give up your own beauty and accept a fantastic visage to enhance the effect of Lettice's charms; would you now?"

Geraldine blushed as he said "your own beauty."

"Lettice needs no such sacrifice," she an-

swered, "a lily can hold its own against a staring, red geranium. One thing however is true, I assure you. I would not part with the small share of imagination I possess, for the most transcendent beauty—small as it is, it is a source of inexpressible delight."

"Which under altered circumstances may change into a source of inexpressible wretchedness," he answered gloomily. "But you are right—imagination is pre-eminently *the* gift of God. When He puts it into the power of man to *create*, in very deed the virtue of his own essence goes out from Him, and beholding the children of genius he says truly 'Ye are gods.'"

They had by this time again reached the lime-tree, and Geraldine, mindful of Robert's request, paused that on Lord Rotherhame's departure she might hear at once what he had to say and escape into the house. Wishing her good-bye, Lord Rotherhame was turning away when a sudden thought struck him, and he followed her under the tree.

"I forgot to tell you," he said, "that my cousin, Mr. Dacre, has offered us two places for the Debate in the Commons to-night. I was sure you would like to go, as it will be one of the best nights of the Session. Can you be ready in two hours' time when Lady Susan will call for you?"

"I should like it of all things," answered Geraldine, eagerly. "But are you sure Lettice will not want to go?"

"Oh, you need not be afraid. I don't think either my son or my daughter would consider it a treat to sit through five hours of listening, even if Pericles or Pitt were the orators. As for Berkeley, he is altogether above taking an interest in the ephemeral struggles of party. He never gets beyond the first sheet of the *Times*, where his energies are exhausted by the endeavours to find out an acquaintance born, married or dead."

"Oh, oh! Berkeley's delicious when he gets on politics," here hee-hawed Robert. "You should have heard how he set Lord Rotherhame and me roaring by his essay on England, Geraldine—its customs and privileges, the chief of the latter appearing to be that it had been cleared of the wolves that once infested it. It's a pity you don't bring it out and treat Geraldine to your views, Berkeley. She don't half appreciate her advantages, I'll bet."

Lord Rotherhame's brow darkened. He had not yet come to the point when he cared to hear Mr. Bogle make a public buffoon of his son and heir. It was irritating too to see Ralph so impassive—not a movement betraying provocation.

"You are too satirical, Bogle," he said coldly. "You will frighten us all."

"I was only repeating what you said yourself, Lord Rotherhame, when you looked through the essay. That wasn't the best joke by a long way. Didn't he make out

that our 'world renowned poet, Shakespeare'—with more *Daily Telegraph* to the same effect—had written a humorous historical play on the times of *George IV.*"

"I suppose it might take off the point of the joke," remarked Geraldine, "if the probability were entertained of 'George' having been accidentally written for 'Henry.'"

"I must thank you for devising such a way of escape for our malaprop essayist, Miss Egerton, as he does not seem disposed to seek one for himself," and Lord Rotherhame darted an exasperated glance at the still silent Ralph. "I fear he must have mistaken his blunder for wit, and our ridicule for applause. Even the fool is proud of his bells and the clown of his scarlet patches."

He walked away with a flushed cheek, and Geraldine saw him bite his lip as he went.

"My father is right," said Berkeley, speaking for the first time, with a smouldering fire in his eyes, "it is a good thing to be amusing even unintentionally and at one's own expense."

"That's right! That's the way!" cried Robert mockingly, "be mum in the Governor's presence, and cheek him directly he has turned his back. Come now, you get indoors and put yourself to your Greek—I shall be in with you in half an hour."

Geraldine longed to be in Berkeley's shoes for a moment, and it provoked her beyond measure to see the dull submission with

which, taking off his hat to her, he turned at once to obey his tormentor's mandate.

"There's lovely manners for you!" Bob called after him. "Good-day, Mr. Adonis! You see he can bow with his head, Geraldine, if he can't do much else with it."

"I don't know what he's made of," she answered, bending over her work, "I don't think any one should speak to me twice as you do to him."

"Oh, you've no notion what he is," returned Robert, rather flattered than otherwise at the impression he had produced. "He don't seem to have a notion of chaff. His father makes game of him ten times worse than what I do, and he stands as solemn as a judge and stupid as Old Sin—he don't feel it one scrap. It would make you bust to hear it."

Geraldine was silent and began to put up her work.

"Don't go just yet," pleaded Robert, earnestly. "It may be days before I get the chance of a talk with you again. You're willing enough to chatter to the Earl whenever he comes near you, but you can't always have a 'lord' at your beck and call, you know."

"True, Robert," she answered with a mock sigh, "those exalted beings are like 'angels' visits,' few and far between in this lower world of ours."

"What a fearful way Rotherhame has of

going on with girls," remarked Robert, with profound guile. He had his special reasons for wishing to bring down Geraldine strictly to his own level, and as a first means to that end felt he must lift her off the high horse to which "the Earl's" attentions had doubtless elevated her. "I remember at one time his being awfully attentive to Tot Browel, his agent's daughter, you know—sent her a bracelet or something—and now, I see, he has taken up with you. I'm not sorry we got you the introduction to him, because it gives me another chance of seeing you, but don't you get rather sick sometimes of having to do the agreeable so incessantly with a cut and dried paterfamilias like him?"

"I have not yet arrived at that climax of suffering, but when I do will remember that you are at hand to console me."

"Ah! you'll be safe to find him out after a bit. Like all your great swells he's a bit of a humbug, very thick with you one day and hardly knowing you the next, and imagining he honours you highly by his notice. A clever chap! but too given to penny-a-lining sentiment to suit my taste."

"Sentiment, Robert? he was 'cut and dried' just now. He seems to be a most happy combination of opposite vices."

"I say, Geraldine," interposed Robert, confidentially, "I suppose they told you of that scrape Berkeley got into last winter. Does Lady Lettice know what it was about?"

"No, she knows nothing," answered Geraldine, wakening to sudden interest. "Do tell me—I will keep the secret religiously."

"Why, you've got a sort of right to my secrets, so I'll make no bones about it. I had it all first-hand from the girl herself. It was a love affair with the step-daughter of his tutor, Bradshaw. Just fancy that young calf thinking himself in love! But it shows you how high and mighty Lord Rotherhame is—he wouldn't hear of the match for love or money, and she's an uncommon pretty, stylish girl too. We twain have had no end of a joke together since her engagement to Berkeley was broken off."

"How did you come across her?" inquired Geraldine.

"Well, last Easter, I was at Bath for a fortnight, and we met at no end of parties and tea-fights, and went walking together when her chaperone's back was turned. I believe she thought I was on the point of popping the question, and I might have, if it hadn't been for superior attractions elsewhere. We waxed highly confidential, and at the first wrinkle I got about her and Berkeley I set to work and wormed the whole truth out of her."

"You must have been on very intimate terms for her to have confided her love affairs to you."

"Well, I think you know, she was anxious to make me aware that I wasn't her first

chance—thought to bring me up to the scratch, I s'pose. Mind you! I don't say I took every word the little piece of vanity said for Gospel, for she wanted to make out it was she had thrown Berkeley over, not he her. I wasn't green enough for that. I could see with half an eye that the Earl had put a stop to it because he didn't consider her good enough to come into his family, or else the naughty little jilt would have taken Mr. Berkeley for his nobility, however small beer she thought of him personally."

"Hateful creature!" exclaimed Geraldine, with flattering candour.

"Oh, come! Draw it mild! I dare say at the time she did fancy she liked him, and besides, when he and she were spooning she hadn't had any experience of what true love was."

"I ought to be careful what I say," she returned, smiling, "it is clear I shall have to congratulate you before long."

"There now! didn't I know you'd say that," said Robert, with an expressive leer, "didn't I know you'd go and take what I said in that way? But you needn't trouble. It doesn't follow, does it, that because a girl cares for a fellow he should always return the feeling?"

"No, that's true," and Geraldine maliciously assumed an air of relief. "Still you spoke of her with such enthusiasm, and the whole affair seemed in every way so eligible,



that I could not but come to one conclusion."

"Eligible! I'm not so sure of that. It mightn't be a bad settlement for Carry Bradshaw to marry a man who is almost certainly heir to a large property in the Lakes, but perhaps my Governor and Uncle Standish might not be any more pleased to have me going in for a wife who would bring me nothing but her looks than Lord Rotherham was. Not that I'd have stopped for them though; I verily believe I should have booked myself, had it not been for the memory of a yet more ravishing being. Ah, Geraldine! You don't know how chaffed I have been about you since Christmas. Some College pals of mine, to whom I had never mentioned your name even, got hold of it, and worried my life out of me."

"Did they? How amusing! I really was unconscious that I had had the good luck to make an impression on you."

"You expect me to swallow that, I'm pretty sure"—this was spoken with an ingratiating smile that almost sent her into convulsions—"I'm pretty sure you've not forgotten our *trois-temps* the night of the ball at the Castle, and all the abuse you brought on me for neglecting other girls, and the moaning of the various dowagers and forsaken wall-flowers. That's just like me! I know it's a shame, but when I get one supremely jolly partner my one idea is to go

on with her and bear down all the rest before me."

"In that case I trust I may never have the ill-luck to be present when you are performing with a partner after your own heart."

"You *have* been present, and on those occasions always must be." The glance which accompanied this compliment was charged with meaning unutterable. "Geraldine, will you give those fellows the right to chaff me about you, and even to couple your lovely name with mine?"

"I don't see why I should object," she returned, and added mentally, "I should be sorry to interfere with such a harmless recreation."

Robert looked rather dubious on hearing this rejoinder, but remembering that it rested with him to take the initiative, he drew a little closer, and snatched at her hand, well nigh crushing it in his broad, short fingers.

"You know what you have agreed to, then? I like all girls' society, but in none have I found such a charm as in yours. I worship you! I have thought of nothing but you ever since we parted."

"Do you mean this for a proposal, Robert?" she cried, with a burst of laughter.

"You know I do, you pet!" he replied, with ardour.

"But, pray, where do you propose to stow me away? Has the master of the house been consulted on the proposed addition to

its inmates? And what department in *our* co-pupil's studies could I undertake as *your* helpmate? Reading, writing, or arithmetic?"

Her continued levity began to make Robert a little surly.

"I wish you would be serious," he muttered, "and stop that eternal joking. Of course, you know well enough I am not going to tutorise that young stupid for ever. I shall be taking orders shortly"—here he began to quiet down again—"and shall be sure to get a good living from my godfather, let alone the estate in the Lakes, and then—oh, what bliss!" and attempting to repossess himself of the hand which Geraldine had withdrawn, he approached his lips to her cheek with the smacking action with which he might have neared a peach.

"No, no," cried Geraldine, drawing back dismayed. "This is the most extraordinary thing! Indeed, I could not marry you under any circumstances whatever."

"Now don't go on pretending," he burst in, angrily; "you know you've only this moment consented to be engaged, and I can't stand joking on such a subject."

"I have consented to nothing of the kind," protested Geraldine, alarmed by his positive assertion. "I only said your friends might chaff you as much as they pleased, and so they may—it is not in my power to prevent them."

"Then, what the deuce have you been making all this time?" shouted Robert, whose temper, at all times irritable, was owing to savageness by this blow to his self-conceit. "What did you mean by drawing me on, as you did at Rotherhame, and treating me in this shameful way? I should never have dreamed of wanting you if it hadn't been for your way of going on, and your everlasting chaff," and he violently brushed away her hand, which was resting on his seat.

"Well, if this is a specimen of the treatment I should have met with on my honeymoon," she returned, smiling, but secretly frightened, "perhaps it is as well for me that I should remain in single blessedness. For you, in a city full of charming young ladies, I don't think you need long lament your loss."

"Indeed, you are right there," responded Robert, with a ferocious laugh. "I assure you I shall not trouble myself any more about it. There are plenty of other better girls waiting who would be thankful for the chance." "Possibly," she returned, coldly. "I hope so, for your sake," and collecting her work materials she once more rose to go.

"I know what it is! You were different before," cried Robert, glaring at her. "It is the Earl's notice that makes you turn up your nose at everyone else. But I forewarn you not to reckon too much on that, for any-

one can see with half an eye that he is only amusing himself with you."

"If I were to give Lord Rotherhame the faintest hint of your insolence, sir," she answered, with flashing eyes, "you would receive your *congé* on the spot. And since you seem to imagine that my sentiments have changed towards you, let me say that although you do, indeed, appear to singularly ill-attractance by people like Lord Rotherhame and his son, who know how to behave like gentlemen, yet under no circumstances could I have done more than barely tolerate you. Had I liked you in any other single respect, the manner in which you treat your sisters, your pupil, and all others whom circumstances enable you to bully, would have been sufficient to disgust me."

"I'd knock you down, I declare, if you weren't a woman!" growled Robert, between his teeth.

"I was not aware you ever let such scruples stand in your way," she answered, catching the mutter; "certainly not when your school-children's heads are in question."

Robert, transported beyond all bounds, raised his heavy boot to stamp, and Geraldino, seized with a sudden panic, waited to hear no more, but fled with undignified precipitation towards the shelter of the house.



## CHAPTER XIV.

Full of sweet wisdom gathered from the brooks,  
She there discussed his melancholy case,  
With wholesome texts, learn'd from kind Nature's books !  
HOOD.

A LONG and exciting evening in the House of Commons, followed by a rather late appearance next morning, gave Geraldine's anger time to cool, and enabled her to decide that she would deny herself the amusement of confiding to her host the story of her first conquest. The fear that he might feel himself in honour bound to tell her parents of what had occurred, and that some provoking scruples on their part might interfere to expedite her return home, would alone have been sufficient to bring her to this conclusion. But she was also faintly repentant for having, perhaps unnecessarily, scathed her quondam admirer, and shrank from exposing him to the risk of losing his berth and his patron's favour. To have seen him turned out would in itself have given her unlimited satisfaction, but this she could not have purchased by a betrayal of his trust. Lettice, accordingly, was her only confidante, and the two girls laughed much together in private over Robert's ferocious glances and clumsily-constructed snubs.

A thunderstorm had burst over London on the night which Geraldine had spent listening to the debate, but the supply of heat seemed inexhaustible, and it did not avail to cool the air. Two days after it was still brooding over the city, and the lurid glare that the sun made through the dense masses of violet cloud seemed more insupportable than the undimmed blaze of gold that had gone before.

Geraldine went downstairs at about eleven one morning, to the empty library, to look out a book. Lord Rotherhame had left the house immediately after breakfast, and she was alone, standing on a chair and examining the bookshelves. It was a gloomy room, with smoke-dulled windows and slightly faded Turkey carpet, a table laden with letters, account-books, and newspapers, and walls garnished with engravings of Georgian Court ladies, and of London in the olden time. The door opened, and looking down from her elevated post she saw Lord Rotherhame come in.

"I must apologise for my intrusion," she said, smiling. "Lettice told me I might venture, and we thought you had gone out."

"I am glad to say I am very much at home. Let me help you; which is it you want—Byron? Then you must wait a moment, for it is a small volume, and it has fallen back somewhere behind those monster Bibles and Concordances. Sit down and

amuse yourself with Doré's 'Inferno,' while I weed it out for you."

Geraldine descended, and sat in the big arm-chair to look through the volume he laid open for her. The pictures—nether flames, black heights, and red lurid chasms—were congenial to the day, but she glanced at them with an abstracted eye.

"Lord Rotherhame," she began, abruptly, after a brief silence, "I have a remark to make to you; a personal remark."

He came down from his perch—Byron in hand—and seated himself upon the table in front of her.

"Personal?" he said. "Pray go on, then, I like to hear myself criticised."

"That confession helps me to make mine. Do you know, I have come to the conclusion that you are an egotist!"

"An egotist?" he repeated, seriously, "that means a bore."

"Not necessarily, if the ego happens to be interesting. I arrived at my conclusion from the way in which you repeat poetry. You seem to become so vividly conscious of self; you make the poet's words your own, and use them as the vehicle of your individual mood, instead of losing yourself in the abstract conception he presents, and merging your personality in his."

"Why should I not? A poet's thoughts are the thoughts of humanity. His words,



the gift by which God enables this great dumb-asylum we call the world, to give them utterance. A poem, therefore, belongs to man as man—I have the right to appropriate its language. I have talked a good deal about myself of late,” he continued, after a pause, still on the defensive, while Geraldine sat listening on her great chair like a judge, “but you must do me the justice to believe that I do not presume on the patience of the world in general as I have on yours.”

“You do not ‘speak your sadness to the rude unheeding crowd,’ ” quoted Geraldine, with a lenient smile. “Perhaps not, but does not the fact that you keep apart from the mass, that your nature is composed of elements that will not mix well with the ingredients of other minds, go to support my case against you?”

“To save myself the trouble of further self-vindication, I think I will admit that your criticism is partly just. What would you have me do? I cannot offer to save myself, for I have studied mankind from my corner, and the result has not been a wish either to change or to fuse. Do not think I speak conceitedly; I am not imagining myself superior to my neighbours, but ‘better bear those ills we have, than fly to others that we know not of.’ ”

“You must not try to make me think you are that odious thing, a man who believes in

nobody and nothing," said Geraldine, with earnestness.

"I don't know," he answered, with an irritating smile. "You seem a very good little girl, for instance, and I do not suspect any conscious baseness to lie hidden beneath that honest face of yours. But the moth and maggot are at work, notwithstanding, and the world will in time eat the heart out of you, as it has out of other good girls before you."

"Thank you for your encouraging prophecy; but how about my father and mother, who have mixed with the world for twenty years, or more? Do you pronounce them mangled and moth-eaten, may I ask?"

Lord Rotherhame's face softened.

"No," he answered. "You have beaten me there, I own. Your parents' hearts are like pure crystal, which the sun looks through and finds no flaw. If I could doubt them, I would doubt God. And yet, why should I link the two together? Their goodness belongs to the human conception of the thing—bountiful kindness, credulous simplicity, generous forgetfulness of evil, large mercy. Put that by the Divine ideal—justice, severity, passionless sanctity, immutable law, stern purity by whose whiteness all fair things turn to foul, exacting perfection that marks each minutest failure, Eternal memory, to which the evil past is ever present."

Geraldine glanced up at the pallid cheeks,

which were wasted, as by some inward fever, and above which the great deep eyes were kindling.

"God is Love," she answered, softly, "that is the only Divine ideal I know, or care to know. Love itself! Not the sweet stream, whose taste upon our lips fills our souls with rapture, and sets us thirsting for more—more—more; but the great primeval Fountain, from which all such streams flow as from their source; the River of Pleasures, whose satisfying perfection we can no more grasp than we can the fleeting beauty of a sunlit hour, or the immense loveliness that fills the universe.

"Remember what we have studied from this garden of late," she went on earnestly, seeing that he was listening with grave attention. "The vast blue sky, and the red sun going down each evening behind a veil of living green, to rise in splendour when morning comes. Think of the sea, the woods, the green meadows and cool streams of the far-off country—grey rocks, and torrents, and purple moors, and mountains whose tops are in the clouds. Think of all these, and you must see that their Creator is generous, rich, profuse, lovely in mind, not nagging, trivial, or icily unsympathetic like the travesty you drew, but the Father of all pure instincts, all delicate perceptions, all large charity, the Father of warm, kind, lovable beings, like my parents. I think, if we do not love God,

**it is because we throw over Him the black shadow of ourselves."**

**"You speak like a prophetess," said Lord Rotherhame, looking into her sparkling eyes, and catching something of their contagious brightness, "and you have brought us back to the point from which we started—egotism. Teach me to believe that it is not the shadow of your own self which makes the God you worship look so lovely—teach me that you are not guilty of the fault of which you accuse me, that you do not merely find in Him what you bring to Him, and I will learn your lesson and bless you for it."**

**"Christ our Lord"—**

Geraldine stopped short as the words escaped her, and flushed crimson. That Sacred Name had hitherto been kept and pondered in her heart, and she had not learnt to appeal to it in words without great effort. But she had said enough for him to understand whither she would direct him for a true conception of the Unknown Deity.

A heavy sigh escaped him. That Face was turned away from him. Could he but make her understand that, she might help him; but, no! with all her confidence and all her sympathy, that sad secret she must never share.

There was a silence of several minutes. Friendship with these two had gone so deep, that they could sit mute in one another's presence without suffering from constraint.

Lord Rotherhame was the first to move. He rose with a strangely subdued and gentle air, and put the Byron in her hands.

"Thanks for your lesson in theology," he said. "It has taught me something I shall not forget."

"And that is"—began Geraldine, falteringly, but with something of religious fervour in her eyes.

"To believe in—*you*," he answered and left the room.

## CHAPTER XV.

He was a coward to the strong,  
He was a tyrant to the weak,  
On whom his vengeance he would wreak.

SHELLEY.

A LETTER, brought by the mid-day post, warned Geraldine that her parents' return, once deferred, was now irrevocably fixed for Monday—the day following the next. Gertrude wrote in raptures at the prospect, filled with longings to pour forth her new experiences into her sister's ears, and to hear Geraldine's in return. Geraldine made up her mind that Gertrude must wait a little longer. Twice before she had suggested a day for her return, and on each occasion her proposal had been promptly negatived by the united voices of Lord Rotherhame, Lettice, and Miss Oliver. She cautioned Gertrude in a hastily written answer that such would probably be the case again, and that if so she could not bring herself to resist their importunities.

Lettice had arranged that that afternoon her brother was to escort Geraldine and herself to the Academy. Ralph was extraordinarily pleased at the prospect of obtaining an hour's freedom from his tutor's society. The access of ill-temper from which

Mr. Bogle had been suffering during the last few days mystified him considerably, but whatever its cause it was far from pleasant to be the elected fetish on which the Oxonian vented his spleen. He went into the study with his pet dog, Tray, an underbred animal whom he particularly affected, because he, like himself, was the butt of unkind criticisms, to inform his tutor of his projected absence, and found him, under pretence of putting the room in order, banging about the furniture with a violence which augured ill. Tray's appearance was greeted with a scowl, for Tray was a thorough-going partisan, and was wont to manifest his discerning hatred of his master's tyrant by an occasional passing snap at his legs.

"I wish that brute was hung, Berkeley," was the agreeable remark with which the preceptor greeted his pupil; "I say, you're just in the nick of time to help me get these letters ready for the post. Just direct the envelopes, will you, while I make out a post office order!"

Ralph complied.

"I am going to the Academy with Lettice at five," he said, and added hastily, "in the pony carriage," lest Robert should volunteer to accompany them.

"Oh, are you? Good luck! Then I'll go off to Westbourne, and call on my friend Powles. Look at this lot of gloves he's bought for me at Whiteley's sale. Rare

Good bargain, ar'nt they. A baker's dozen or a skiv."

"Lavender, lemon, and white!" returned Ralph, negligently examining the pile.

Rather delicate colours for anything but a wedding."

"If they're delicate your mauling wont improve them," returned Robert, roughly. Now, then, the country post will be out in five minutes. Look sharp and direct that letter to my father."

The young gentlemen were engaged in addressing Robert's correspondence when a sudden bound from Tray interrupted their proceedings. The sports of the unlucky animal were clumsy as himself, and as ill luck would have it, the leap by which he intended to reclaim his master's wandering attention brought down his paw in sharp contact with the ink-bottle. The next moment Ralph perceived a black stream running along the table and merging the pale dried tints of Robert's new gloves into a uniform mourning hue. Robert was in that rare state in which a word would suffice to turn him savage, and on discovering the wholesale destruction wrought by the detested dog, he lost all self-control. Abusive epithets poured from his lips, and jumping up, he flung the affrighted creature into a corner and kicked it several times.

"Drop that, you lunatic!" thundered Berkeley, roused from his customary apathy



to fury, and, seizing Robert by the arm, he dragged him on one side, while the dog howling, crept forth from its corner.

Recovering from his surprise, Robert angrily flung off his hand, and, snatching at his walking-stick, was preparing to complete the castigation, when, with a calm air of defiance, Ralph stooped down and took up Tray in his arms.

"Berkeley!" spluttered Robert, breathless at his audacity, "what do you mean by your interference, sir? Put down that beast this moment, will you? I'll give it a thrashing when and where I please—disgusting brute that it is!"

"There, I will buy him off," said Ralph, taking his last sovereign from his purse and flinging it scornfully upon the table. "Keep your superfluous energy for choosing a new baker's dozen. Come along, my Tray, we'll retire into the garden."

Robert followed him to the door and laid a heavy hand upon the cowering animal. A repressed struggle ensued. Ralph's resistance was rather tacit than active, but there was sufficient scuffle to catch the ears of Geraldine and Lettice, who at the moment were coming up the stairs. They looked in, and caught Robert in his attitude of menace.

"Lettice!" exclaimed Ralph, in a tone rendered querulous by fear for his favourite, "take my dog and protect him. He has managed to spill an ink-bottle over Mr.

Bogle's new gloves, and is likely to be half murdered in consequence."

"I beg you'll do nothing of the sort, Lady Lettice," panted the baited Robert. "It's enough to make a cat sick to see the way in which Berkeley pampers that frightful beast. It has been grossly misbehaving itself, and he needn't think that it's to be a nuisance to everybody, and get off scot free."

"I think you forget, Mr. Bogle," answered Lettice, crimsoning at his tone of rude dictation, "that my father never allows an animal to be ill-treated in his house."

"Ill-treated ! That's all my eye ! I'm not going to punish it more than's proper. Berkeley would get more than the dog if he had his deserts. Put it down, I say, sir, instantly."

Berkeley's only answer was to transfer his burden to the arms of Lettice, who, grasping it tightly, moved towards the door. Robert made an involuntary step after her, but, checking himself, said with an air of intense malignity—

"This decides me ! Lord Rotherhame has long talked of getting rid of the cur, and I shall tell him this very night that it is becoming unbearable, and that it makes you so too, and that if I am to have the management of you any longer I must insist on having it poisoned."

The threat made Ralph turn white with

impotent anger, and brought Geraldine forward from her position in the doorway.

"If I were you, Lord Berkeley," she exclaimed, with rather childish vehemence, "I would knock that insufferable young man down. Brute force is the only argument he can understand."

"Hold your tongue, Miss, will you?" shouted Robert, turning on her with the roar of a baited bull, "and don't be intruding your cackle in what don't concern you."

"Come away, Geraldine, come away!" cried Lettice in an agony of apprehension. Never before had her gentle ears been vexed by such rude language.

"Before you go, Lettice," Ralph interposed, "I will trouble Mr. Bogle to apologise to Miss Egerton, or I shall ask my father whether he approves of her being ordered to hold her tongue."

"Take that for your mean insolence, you spiteful puppy!" bellowed Robert; and now completely beyond himself, he brought down his heavy fist with a crashing blow on Berkeley's cheek. The sudden outrage was like a match to gunpowder.

Berkeley staggered for a moment, then sprang back, and, in blind fury, seizing a book from the table, hurled it with all his force at Bogle's head. It missed its mark, and, skimming the young man's whiskers, dashed to pieces a great china bowl on a shelf behind him. The crash was more than

**L**ettice's overstrained nerves could stand, she burst into tears and fled like a frightened hare. Geraldine, apprehensive but resolute, stayed behind to see the play out.

In the dead pause which ensued voices were heard on the stairs, and, with a guilty start, the trio heard Lettice recounting to some one, whose identity was at that moment a matter of fearful suspicion only, the occurrences of the last few minutes. It was a hurried recital, uttered between sobs, and perhaps scarcely intelligible. At all events she or he who heard it seemed to think it necessary to come in person to obtain fuller information, and steps were heard ascending.

"What is all this?" inquired a cold, clear voice, and Lord Rotherhame appeared in the doorway. He looked around him to take in the full meaning of the scene, and seeing the unspoken surprise with which he glanced at her, Geraldine began to feel uncomfortably the awkwardness of her situation, alone, in this masculine retreat, with the two furious disputants. For a moment everyone remained mute. Robert was the first to recover speech, but it was in a shaking voice.

"I am sorry to have to complain once more, Lord Rotherhame, of Berkeley's ungovernable temper!"

"What, sir?" said Lord Rotherhame, turning on his son. "Is it possible that you have been making an exhibition of yourself before a lady?"

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"I leave it to her to decide which of us ~~was~~ two has exhibited himself to the least ~~st~~ advantage," said Ralph, with a short, dry ~~y~~ laugh.

"I see that bowl is broken," said his ~~is~~ father; and then, in a tone of withering ~~ing~~ scorn, he added: "You have not surely been ~~an~~ so silly as to let your temper loose upon an ~~an~~ inanimate object?"

"No," put in Robert, with a venomous ~~ous~~ smile, "Berkeley does not waste his temper ~~er~~ on what can't feel. It would be painful to me ~~e~~, Lord Rotherhame, to have to repeat what ~~at~~ passed before a stranger like Miss Egerton, but if I may speak to you quietly you shall ~~l~~ hear what was the provocation which induced ~~d~~ him to make a violent personal attack upon ~~on~~ myself. It's no fault of his that my head ~~is~~ not broken instead of the bowl."

Geraldine perceived that Robert desired to ~~o~~ get rid of all independent witnesses, that ~~he~~ he might tell his story in his own way, and ~~she~~ she plucked up courage and resolved to foil him.

"I don't think Mr. Bogle's delicacy need ~~d~~ prevent him from telling what took place in my presence who witnessed it—stranger though I may be," she said, looking at him steadily. "I am curious to know what ~~he~~ he will find to say in his own defence."

"Own defence!" burst in Robert, "I don't know what you mean by that! I shall, as in duty bound, tell Lord Rotherhame every single particular without concealment

or exaggeration; but not before you, whose interference has aggravated the disturbance."

Lord Rotherhame cast a rather haughty glance in Geraldine's direction. His ideal lady was always gentle, calm, and yielding, and Miss Egerton's vehement and unasked partisanship with his disfavoured son was in the extreme distasteful to him.

"Ladies are proverbially curious," he said, with a sarcastic smile; "if Miss Egerton insists on hearing you, Bogle, you can't refuse to oblige her."

Robert bestowed a glance of concentrated hatred on his quondam lady-love, but receiving in return a proud, unflinching look, he turned from her, and began his story. Berkeley leaned against the chimney-piece, forcing himself to listen patiently to his tutor's garbled account.

"I hoped of late he had been going on a little better, Lord Rotherhame," he concluded, "but whenever that wretched cur comes in question he seems to forget every atom of respect he owes either you, or me as your representative. The queer thing, to my mind, is, that he never had this extravagant, touchy affection for it till the day when you said it was not worth keeping, since when—out of contradiction, I suppose—he has made its cause his own, neglects his work for it, and encourages it to get into his bed or on to the table, and such like nasty tricks; and if any one ventures to find fault with it you

should only see the awful faces he pulls. I've warned him, times without number, that I should report him to you, but he's gone on just the same, snarling at me and pampering his pet, and now things have come to such a pass that I must really ask you to have the animal poisoned, as you proposed doing months ago."

Lord Rotherhame listened to Robert's long vulgar harangue with a chill composure that contrasted markedly with the scarcely expressed indignation of the remainder of his audience. Berkeley was restrained from attempting to expose his gross misrepresentations by a conviction of the impossibility of obtaining a fair hearing, Geraldine by intense repugnance to bandying words with him before Lord Rotherhame. She determined to postpone all criticism till it could be made in private. Lord Rotherhame paused a moment when the tutor had finished speaking, and then said, in a tone of inexorable decision—

"Since this is the case, the dog must be immediately got rid of. I shall offer it to Mr. Dacre for his stables, and if he refuses it, it will be shot."

"Oh, no," cried Geraldine, "I hope, Lord Berkeley, that if you are obliged to part with your dog you will let me keep him for you. You may trust me to take care of him, and to be ready to give him back to you whenever you may want him."

Ralph looked fervently grateful, but his father interposed with a frown which plainly indicated that he had no intention of being the sport of a young lady's despotic whim.

"You are very kind, Miss Egerton," he said stiffly, "but if you do us the honour to accept any dog of ours, it shall be no mongrel cur."

Geraldine felt instinctively that she was powerless to change his resolution, and drawing herself up she answered—

"Thank you; but if I mayn't have Tray, I won't deprive you of any of your dogs."

Robert, overjoyed at her discomfiture, grinned from ear to ear.

"Well, as you please," returned Lord Rotherhame, with a careless smile. "I know you only asked for it out of charity, and I would on no account take advantage of your good-nature. And now, pray allow me to see you into quieter quarters. Lettice has been made quite ill by this disturbance. I shall see you later, Berkeley."

Geraldine noted the slight shiver with which Berkeley acknowledged this parting promise. She had lighted upon a hard spot in her new friend's character, and for the moment felt as if she almost hated him. She met his eyes, and her own were in a blaze. They parted in silence outside the door, he returning to the library, she, with her stateliest step, ascending in the opposite direction.





A few minutes later a servant came to her with a message from Lettice, requesting her to take her brother's place in the pony carriage, as he was unable to drive with her that day.


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## CHAPTER XVI.

*I am a woman ; when I think I speak.*

SHAKESPEARE.

It was half-past seven when Geraldine re-entered her bedroom, and the dinner hour was at hand—the consecrated hour of intercourse with her host, which she was wont so eagerly to anticipate. As a rule the two girls had Lord Rotherhame to themselves, and Lettice would sit by, an interested but somewhat mystified listener to the gay counterchange of theory and argument between her father and her friend. Geraldine wondered how this evening she would exist through the hour which had usually appeared too short. Would they all sit round in their old positions, dully maintaining a laborious series of civil commonplaces to hide the war within their hearts ? The most awkward silence would seem a less ghastly mockery of their past delightful intercourse than such unmeaning conventionality. Assured of the righteousness of her anger, she yet could not bear to think that she had quarrelled with Lord Rotherhame. Sisterly feuds had frequently raged between herself and Gertrude, and had never outlived the hour that gave them birth. Could she hope that he would prove as placable ? Again she pondered, as



in her rare moments of cool reflection she had pondered before, on the problem of his character. A puzzling problem it seemed in truth. As she knew him, and she believed she had gone some way below the surface, no one could be more quickly sympathetic, more tender to weakness, or—in a sense—more docile and malleable than he. It was true that on nearly every theme they discussed together they differed in opinion, but their divergence had always seemed to her to be rather the result of circumstance than of discrepancy of nature. False and unamiable as his ideas often appeared, she understood them; she felt sure that they were bred of the repulsion which contact with the meanness and pretence of society produces in a mind naturally disposed to trust and to idealise.

Once or twice, when she had been drawn to express some higher thought, she had seen a gleam of responsive feeling kindle enthusiastically in his deep eyes, but the next moment it had died out as quickly as it came, and he had chilled her with a covertly worded sneer. She could not help fancying that some treachery of a friend, some cruel disillusion, some apparent injustice of Fate, must lie at the root of his openly expressed bitterness, his cynical disbelief in goodness of heart and purity of motive. But there were in his character other contradictions for which no such explanation could be found.

One in particular, with which she had become acquainted through some chance words of the Duchess of Naseby, had so perplexed her that she had gone to him to demand an explanation. It was that, although a constant attendant at the sittings of Parliament, and, as she had discovered, keenly interested in political life, he never voted on any question of importance. Her searching catechism evidently perplexed him, but having parried it awhile, he had smilingly silenced her with the unsatisfactory reply—

“Do not grudge me, who in no other way can make myself remarkable, the poor little distinction of eccentricity.”

But the licence allowed to eccentricity must have its limit, and Geraldine, partial as she was, could admit no such plea in justification of Lord Rotherhame's unkindness to his son. She could in no degree understand how any human being could deliberately set himself to make the life of another miserable, much less one to her so chivalrous and tender. What could Ralph have done to excite such deep aversion in his father? It was difficult to picture any boyish fault, however bad or ungentlemanlike, sufficient to account for it. Of jealousy and revenge she knew nothing by experience; nor did she understand that these evil passions possess the fatal power to transform their grand foe, Love, into Hatred—their brother and ally.

Saddened by her fruitless speculations, she

sat inactive, till the trembling vibrations of the gong roused her to nerve herself for the impending encounter with her perplexing friend. How forced, how embarrassing, how unnatural it would be! Happily he was the offender, and on him would devolve by right the business of making the first step to reconciliation. She felt impelled neither by duty nor inclination to relieve him of his obligation. It had surely been mortification sufficient to have been shown so abruptly how infinitesimal was her influence with him, to have sounded its supposed depths, and found them shallows.

The drawing-room was crimsoned with the full glory of the luxuriant after-glow, and as she entered her eyes were dazzled. But the next moment, too late to retreat unperceived, she discerned her dreaded host alone, leaning pensively against the mantelshelf. Not all her righteous indignation could steel her against the fascination of his presence. The red light tinted his dark hair with a hue of auburn, and he turned upon her a bright, commanding gaze which pierced her through the coating of stately indifference in which she had wrapped herself. She knew that it would be more dignified to leave it to him to break the silence, but conscious of her rising colour, and of a disagreeable sensation of embarrassment, words rushed in nervous haste to her lips.

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storm," she said, sitting down on an ottoman at a safe distance from the fireplace where he stood.

"Possibly. There have been mutterings all the afternoon."

"Have there? We have been out driving, but I heard nothing. Perhaps the street-traffic drowned the noise."

He assented briefly, then glanced at the newspaper in his hand, as though politeness alone prevented his continuing its perusal. But a moment later he appeared to come to the conclusion that courtesy required its sacrifice, and laid it open on the table. Geraldine glanced with feverish impatience towards the door, but no Lettice appeared, and the hands of the blue Louis Quatorze clock proclaimed the melancholy fact that five minutes would probably elapse before the welcome announcement that "dinner was on the table." Not merely uncomfortable, but frightened, she resumed conversation, trying desperately topic after topic—the heat, the Academy, the crowds in the Park. He answered civilly, but seemed to grow each moment more abstracted. The once rapid wheels of the social chariot were driving heavily, as though slipping from their axle.

"What do the papers say this evening?" she inquired, when the moments passed, and yet no help appeared. "Is there any news?"

"Nothing of much interest, I fancy.

Perhaps you would like to see for yourself ~~if~~," and he handed her the *Pall Mall Gazette*.

She thanked him, and sat for a ~~few~~ wretched moments with her eyes fixed on the columns of print, of whose meaning ~~she~~ took in nothing. The ordeal was grow~~ing~~ unbearable, and she suddenly resolved to put pride in her pocket, and make an end of the farce she was enacting.

"Are you still angry with me, Lord Rotherhame?" she asked abruptly.

He looked taken aback for the moment, but recovering himself, answered quietly—

"Since you ask me the question, yes, I ~~am~~—very."

"I should be glad to know why," she answered, quivering a little, yet thankful to have broken the ice. "Did you expect me to stand by mute while that despicable Mr. Bogle openly falsified facts, and hear you, on his unsupported and slanderous statement, calmly doom a dear pet dog to death?"

"You went into a passion, and no man likes to see a lady out of temper. She descends at once from the celestial to the earthly, from the sublime to the ridiculous."

"No doubt I behaved in a distressingly unfeminine manner, and so I trust I always shall, if to be servile, heartless, and coldly conventional is tantamount to being feminine."

"Little termagant! I envy the man who

will bend your high spirit to the yoke," he rejoined, glancing with secret admiration at her heightened colour and shining eyes. "The Fates have dealt unkindly with you, Miss Egerton; you should have been born to command, not to obey!"

"On the contrary, it is pleasure to me to obey those who have a rightful claim on my obedience, and who do not forfeit it by injustice and arbitrary coercion."

"I see we should never agree," said Lord Rotherhame with an offended air, as if he read a personal meaning in her words. "I do not believe in the obedience that can be dispensed with at will, any more than I care for the friendship which owns no obligations, and changes into antagonism at its first trial."

Geraldine turned pale. The terrible fear assailed her that the friendship, which had grown so fast and strong that she had come to believe it indestructible, might already have received its death blow.

Ignoring his injustice, forgetting pride, remembering nothing but that she had offended and must seek forgiveness, she began faintly to plead her cause.

"So my unlucky frankness is construed into a solemn declaration of enmity. I am indeed judged harshly for having once ventured to disagree with you. Have I not, on my side, some cause for complaint, that your confidence should be so lightly changed into suspicious ill-will?"



"I complain of nothing," said Lord Rotherhame, bitterly. "Women are proverbially fickle, and I never expected that you would prove an exception to the rule."

"Do not say I am fickle," she answered, in a trembling voice. "What have I done that you should bring such cruel charges against me? How could I help being exasperated to find you believing every malicious tale that Robert Bogle brings against your son, and never seeming to perceive the insolence and tyranny by which his life is made a burden to him?"

"I am scarcely so blind as you imagine. I see as plainly as yourself that Robert Bogle is mean, coarse, brutal, incapable of any of the feelings of a gentleman—the incarnation, in fine, of all that is vulgar and offensive. Knowing this, I have used him deliberately to make my son realise that it is his interest as well as his duty to abstain from actions which disgrace his family—a design with the accomplishment of which you ignorantly and wantonly interfered. If there were any reality in the friendship with which you have been amusing yourself, you would trust me, even though my conduct did not always approve itself to your partially informed judgment, and would require stronger provocation than I have given you to-day before you threw me over."

"I never did throw you over, and I never will!" reiterated Geraldine, succumbing

more and more to the requirements of his imperious and exacting jealousy.

"Promise me, then, that another time you will not openly take part against me," said Lord Rotherhame, his lips relaxing into a slow smile. "Alone with me you may take me to task as you please, but in public you must be my partisan. I object to being attacked by the people I like."

"I *must* promise, I suppose, if nothing else will content you," she answered dolefully, "though it always has seemed to me that half the charm of friendship lies in its absolute mutual freedom. Will you spare poor old Tray as a sign that we are reconciled?" she continued, with a slight quiver in her voice.

"You are a kind little soul, and I cannot find it in my heart to be angry with you long," he said relently. "Yes, you shall have Tray, and you may take him home with you or leave him to Berkeley as you please. In good time here comes my Lady Lettice! Have you recovered your spirits, fair Dolorosa?"

Lettice's entrance was a welcome relief to Geraldine after the painful tension of the last few minutes. She had been waging a fierce warfare, and felt that she had come out of the fray thoroughly defeated, bound a willing captive to her conqueror's car. She noted the victorious smile upon his lips as he rose to greet his daughter, and a faint resent-

ment mingled with her thankfulness that an evil had been averted worse than bondage—the evil of estrangement.

The dinner table, with its cool silver and sparkling glass, its ambrosial peaches and fragrant orchids, bloomed like the garden of the Hesperides, and in presence of such ethereal refinement beef and mutton seemed gross impossibilities.

Lord Rotherhame, talking with more than usual vivacity, soon succeeded in restoring Geraldine to her accustomed spirits, and conversation flowed gay and smooth, interrupted only by an occasional cry from Lettice when a blue flash, making the wax-lights quiver, startled her momentarily from her attitude of quiet attention.

“I wanted to ask you about one thing the Duchess of Naseby said when she lunched here on Tuesday,” said Geraldine. “Is it really true that they once offered you the Garter?”

“Yes. The Government of the day happened to be in a critical position, when a feather weight in the scale would decide their fate. I espoused their cause, wrote a savage article in the *Quarterly*, and waxed fiercely eloquent in the House. They offered me the Garter as a reward.”

“And you refused it! Oh, Lord Rotherhame!”

“I did, not without a pang; for if great Babylon could give me anything that I

should care to have, it would be a place in the highest order of England's chivalry. But to feel oneself under obligations to the Prime Minister would be to pay too dearly for the honour."

Geraldine sighed. She had heard the Duchess lament this sacrifice as the crowning and most lamentable eccentricity of her eccentric nephew, and could not herself exonerate such excessive pride from the charge of folly.

"I have always thought that an ignoble pride which refuses to accept a benefit," she said.

"From those we love," answered Lord Rotherhame, "their gifts are precious, never humiliating! But in this particular case it would have been more correct to have said that I could not bring myself to accept Government pay for the small effort—the almost solitary effort—I ever made in the cause of patriotism."

"Papa wanted the Garter so much," said Lettice, laughing, "that he would not trust himself to wait, but wrote his letter declining it on the spot, and sent Ralph flying off to St. Dunstan's to post it."

"Do you know, Lettice," said Lord Rotherhame, changing the subject as if it jarred upon him, "I had a long letter from Mr. Daubeny to-day. He is safely established at Rotherhame again, and says he misses you children dismally."

"Does Mr. Daubeney never come with you to London?" asked Geraldine.

"He does generally, but this year I persuaded him to go to the South of France instead, and there he has been since March. We wouldn't let him come back, would we, Lettice?"

"*You* wouldn't papa," returned Lettice, smiling. "As far as *we* were concerned, we would all much rather that he had stayed at home, and he himself didn't at all want to go away."

"I knew he would get ill if he spent the spring in England. Besides," he added, turning to Geraldine with a merry look in his eyes, "it is a very good thing for a clergyman to have his ideas enlarged occasionally, even against his will. Don't you agree with me, Miss Egerton?"

Geraldine saw by his manner that there was something about this foreign exile of Mr. Daubeney which Lettice did not suspect. Lord Rotherhame, in point of fact, eager for a few months' freedom from the clerical supervision of his librarian, had, some days before the family move to London, developed an extreme anxiety with regard to his health, and counselled a trip to Mentone, which unwelcome recommendation he powerfully seconded by a present of £200, a piece of moral coercion before which the sensitive chaplain's opposition had at last succumbed.

"I am going upstairs to make my peace,

before I turn out to my ball," whispered Lord Rotherhame, to Geraldine, as he opened the door for the young ladies to pass out. "Shall I tell Berkeley that you mean to give him Tray?"

Geraldine smiled radiantly, nodded, and went out, her cheeks suffused with a happy flush.

Ralph was lying alone in the fast deepening twilight in his little attic bedroom. The solitary window of this not very lively apartment was so high above the floor that it was little better than a skylight, and the small low bed on which he had stretched himself was stowed away in a dark corner, where a sloping beam opposed a sturdy barrier to the possible ingress of intruding sunbeams. A change in the arrangement of his sisters' sleeping quarters, aided perhaps by the decrease of paternal interest in his affairs, had banished Berkeley to this dreary abode. Its native ugliness was not relieved by any attempt at decoration.

The books, the brackets, the modern china knick-knacks, that had been the pride of his heart ever since he could boast a room of his own, were here no longer to be seen.

Ralph accepted his change of room, as he did his change of life, with outward resignation, but to have adorned it with the tokens of bygone love and happiness would have been like garlanding a skeleton. He asked nothing now but necessities, and those his

attic held—a chest of drawers, a washing-stand, and, above all, a bed—a bed on which he could fling himself when the burden of life dragged him down, and he was out of range of unfriendly eyes. Who does not know the physical prostration induced by an aching heart?

Ralph had given up all hopes of winning back his father's love. Three months had worn away before he had allowed himself to believe that he finally should fail, three months, in which by uncomplaining patience under slights and injustice, and absolute dutifulness of look and word, he had tried to atone for his one act of definite rebellion. Two more, and he had accepted this at first inconceivable misery as his allotted fate. He recognised with bitter justice that his father was not wholly to be blamed, that it must be difficult to cherish feelings of affection for any one so dull, spiritless, and uninteresting as he had grown.

There were fires at work beneath the crust of this boy's surface-life, and forbidden an outward vent, even in solitude, by the single power of his own stern will, they raged the fiercer in their hidden prison. In the depths of his heart Ralph loved his sarcastic, inexorable father with a fierce and jealous love, a love which added poison to each one of his lightly-uttered taunts, and sharpened cold glances from his beautiful, indifferent eyes into polished swords.

He felt no enmity against the smiling girl, who seemed of late to have taken his place as his father's confidante, and whose little endearments he remembered with gratitude. But it was gall and wormwood to see the affection and interest that had once been lavished on him given to another, and sensitive for his dead mother's honour, as any knight of olden times on behalf of his lady-love, the dark dread lest a stranger should steal her place, laid a fresh load on his already overburdened spirit.

Leaving Robert to devour his dinner in solitary dignity, Ralph had been for some hours shut into his own room with Tray—the faithful companion who would be soon thrust down into an untimely grave. There Lord Rotherhame found him, when moved by a species of compunction he came to look for him. In spite of the displeasure which he had thought it incumbent on him to express, displeasure which had been rendered real by Geraldine's unfortunate espousal of his cause, Lord Rotherhame felt a secret satisfaction that the worm had turned at last, and Ralph's outbreak of natural anger had done more to win him back his father's alienated heart than all the months of passive submission that had gone before. And now that Geraldine was contrite, Lord Rotherhame felt disposed to indulge his impulse of kindness. The sight of the forlorn boy, lying alone, his arms about the condemned dog's neck,



touched him more than he would have cared to own.

"Lie down, boy," he said, as Ralph sprang up hastily from his pillow. "I am not come to lecture you, nor to disturb your conference with this very funny favourite of yours. It is a pity I am no artist, or I should have a fine opportunity of drawing the 'last evening of a condemned criminal' from the scene before me."

Berkeley looked up wondering, but half fearful, and instinctively tightened his grasp on Tray's neck.

"My boy, don't look at me like that!" said Lord Rotherhame, with a thrill of pain in his voice. "I don't want to hurt your dog—keep him and welcome, and as your tutor seems to think the house will not hold him and Tray together, let the least worthy turn out. I shall not always be so hard upon you, Ralph."

Ralph sprang up, and unable to speak, flung one arm round his neck. Lord Rotherhame felt his son's heart beat tumultuously against his own.

His eyes moistened for a moment.

"Perhaps it was my own fault, but I sometimes thought you didn't care a fig about me, Ralph," he said.

"Oh, father! only too much, only too much!"

"Come, don't let us wax sentimental," said Lord Rotherhame, finding it difficult,

even while he spoke, to command his voice. "I would rather hear you laugh again, as you did in the old days, when you were my good boy, and I used to spoil you. As soon as it can be done with due regard to decency, we will send Bogle back to his native sty ; I don't think you need him longer to teach you manners. And now good-night, unless you are disposed to come out with me and dance at the Italian Embassy."

"Not to-night, thanks, father dear, I"—murmured Berkeley, inarticulately, and he could add no more.

"As you please, only don't mope in this dismal attic longer than can be helped."

He patted Ralph's shoulder, and, the boy seizing his hand, kissed it passionately. Then he left him.

The evening seemed a very festival of good will, and reconciled thus unexpectedly with the son from whom for six months past he had been drifting further and further apart, Lord Rotherhame's conscience seemed suddenly lightened of a burden, which, almost unconsciously to himself, had been pressing on it painfully.

He felt freer, less self-reproachful, than since their estrangement first began, and in the present relief scarce heeded that other leaden load which he had borne so long that custom had almost inured him to its weight. He leaned back in the carriage, for once almost light-hearted, when, on a sudden, as

the horses turned sharply the corner of the Square, the light of the street lamp fell upon a face, the sight of which startled him instantly into an erect posture.

The shock was over in a moment, the carriage whirled on in a cloud of dust, and nothing was left of the vision which had flashed across his eye's disc but a strange uncomfortable qualm about the region of his heart. The suddenness of the apparition made it appear unreal. Lord Rotherhame laughed at himself for a dreamer, and with a resolute effort turned his thoughts to other themes.

## CHAPTER XVII.

Faithful are the wounds of a friend.

PROVERBS XXVII., 6.

HE alighted at the Italian Embassy where a great ball was going on, and prepared to spend an hour watching the dancing, and talking to his acquaintances. The Duchess Dowager of Naseby was among the guests, but he scarcely expected even to see her, for the old lady's passion for gambling kept her at the card table early and late; she was known even to follow the ungodly practice of sitting down to vingt-et-un by sober daylight. It was therefore no small surprise to him to be accosted by her Grace at the ball-room door, and invited cordially to come and have a chat.

"I won't keep you long tied to an old woman's apron-string, Kenelm," she said, with her most amiable smile, "but I can't let you cut me altogether."

"It is not my fault if we see little of each other," said Lord Rotherhame, following her dutifully to a couch in a deep recess, whose curtained obscurity was lit up by the blaze of her diamonds. "Your Grace is generally otherwise engaged."

"But it *is* your fault, you perverse creature, that we don't meet in the card-room.

Never mind, you will have to come to it one of these days. Old people who don't play cards are sure to take to drink or Methodism, a sedentary life must have its resources! Why didn't you bring Lettice here to-night, Ken? She has turned out as pretty a girl as I always feared she would, but nobody will be the wiser for that if you keep her for ever swathed in cotton-wool with the family-jewels."

"I have no wish to cast my pearl before swine," he answered, "nor any ambition to vulgarise her by placing her among the professional beauties whom royalty lorgnettes, and whose charms are exhibited in photograph shops for public contemplation."

"No fear of that. Lettice is not the sort of young lady to hit the popular taste. They would as soon think of making a 'beauty' of her as of the Virgin Mary. I have been favoured with a long visit from your good, tiresome little governess this afternoon. What a tongue she has! We went into all the children's ailments, and settled the whole course of their future training—moral, intellectual and religious—in the course of twenty minutes. I told her she had better have them inspected by Sir James Simpson. Lettice has a troublesome cough, and little Cicely is more subject to headaches than she ought to be, poor child!"

Lord Rotherhame, careful over his little children as a hen for her chicks, looked

xious at this announcement, and was beginning a consultation as to the right course to be pursued, when the Duchess, always accustomed to follow her whims, cut him short with some impatience.

"Yes, yes, yes! talking won't mend them, so I am sure Miss Oliver and I said enough before dinner to heal a whole hospital of incurables. You must have the doctor and let me what *he* says. Have you still got that tall, shy girl with you whom you introduced to me at your 'at home' a fortnight ago?"

"Lettice's friend, Miss Egerton?" asked Lord Rotherhame, feeling conscious, he knew not why.

"*Lettice's friend!* Oh, my Lord, I have lived too long in the world to be taken in by such pretty phrases as that."

"Aunt Bessie!" exclaimed Lord Rotherhame, colouring like a girl.

The Duchess laughed behind her fan.

"Don't blush, Kenelm, that hardly looks like innocence," she said.

"If I blush it is at the extraordinary ideas you seem to wish to suggest. There is no reason why Miss Egerton—Lettice's friend I will call her with all deference to you—should not prolong her stay for six months if she could do so with convenience to herself. She is a most charming girl, beautiful, high-spirited, and has a mind which is at once sweet and original. I should have thought

that you, who have always blamed me for the conventual life my daughters lead, would be glad to know they have a visitor of their own age at last."

"Perhaps I ought," said the Duchess, "but, after the Herculean efforts I have vainly made to induce you to bring about them young people of their own standing, you must not be surprised if the one exception you at last make excites my curiosity a little, especially when I reflect that she is a mere chance acquaintance, and that your knowledge of her parents even has been confined to a couple of days' intercourse in the country."

"Is it not enough that the friend invited for her pleasure should be one of Lettice's own choice?" asked Lord Rotherham, curtly.

"But when I further learned," pursued her Grace, with merciless distinctness, "that Lettice had nothing to do with her so-called friend's invitation, but that it was devised and issued by yourself alone, my experienced mind began to take alarm—alarm which was not diminished when I was informed by others of what I can see for myself, that the young lady has eyes for no one but you, and that you spend hours which used to be given to solitude, walking with her in the garden, talking with her in the drawing-room, and that you permit her even to invade your quiet sanctum, the library."

"This is the most ridiculous nonsense I ever heard," he interrupted, "though perhaps I ought not to be surprised that a houseful of idle women should seize on the barest pretext for inventing a silly scandal. I suppose Miss Oliver has been treating you to some of the gossip of the servants' hall."

"Now don't be visiting your displeasure on her, poor old soul, I beg. What she repeated to me is in truth the talk not of the servants' hall only, where no doubt it is amply discussed, but the terror of your eldest son, the standing joke of his, no doubt intellectual, but painfully frightful preceptor, the common topic of discussion in the whole circle of your acquaintance."

"I never have troubled myself about the goose-gabble of society," exclaimed Lord Rotherhame, angrily, "and I never will. I have talked with and entertained Miss Egerton as I should any guest heaven sent me, only with greater pleasure than ordinary, because it is not often one comes in contact with a nature so interesting and gifted as hers. She regards me as a fatherly friend, a fact which the very freedom and simplicity of our intercourse puts beyond a doubt. That is the extent of the foundation on which this wonderful romance has been built up. My dear aunt, pray let me hear no more on the subject."

"And you really never contemplated going further, Kenelm? I own I had thought the



young lady's beauty—for she is, undoubtedly, a handsome girl—had made an impression on you."

"Never!" he answered, in a voice that rang. And then he said, softly—"My heart lies buried in a distant grave."

"Still, you must remember," persisted the Duchess, much relieved, and looking at him kindly, "that your own immunity is no protection to others. You like this girl well enough to study her interests a little, Kenelm. I remember what I was when I was young. You must not break her heart."

"Aunt Bessie," he answered, colouring again, this time for Geraldine's honour, "how can you imagine anything so preposterous? I am old enough to be her father."

"You are not forty yet, and a hundred times more vivacious, youthful, and attractive than the great majority of the men between twenty and thirty, who are old and blasé from their nurseries, and whose hobbled-hoy shape is the only youthful thing about them. Do you think that Miss Egerton stole out into the garden and met you at midnight entirely by accident?"

Lord Rotherhame started, and looked at her with fear.

"It was an innocent action enough, no doubt—she is young and ignorant, and wanted to enjoy herself. But, oh, Kenelm! is it possible men can be so blind? Do you not read in word or look the story which her

**bright eyes, and blushing cheeks, and eager smiles proclaim to everyone beside, that the poor, foolish little thing is over head and ears in love with you?"**

There was a silence. Lord Rotherhame turned away his face and thought, and his breath came faster and faster, as with this new light—or rather gas-glare on them—he read another meaning in countless episodes between himself and his young guest, to all but himself unknown. A great and violent pain attacked his heart. It seemed strange, indeed, that he alone—whose sympathy with her nature ought to have sharpened a naturally keen penetration—should need to have Geraldine's feelings expounded to him by one who was a stranger to her. But mixed with all his irritable pride and boasted knowledge of the world, he had not only that kind of critical humility which leads men to contemplate and despise themselves, but a measure of real simplicity. Once or twice a suspicion of the fatal truth had dimly flitted across his mind, but had immediately been dismissed from it as the preposterous vagary of a morbid imagination.

"Do not be making yourself miserable, my unfortunate Don Quixote," said the Duchess, who was watching him narrowly, "about the mischief your short-sightedness has already, I fear, wrought. It is not irretrievable. Go home, and conquering all selfish shrinkings, have the courage to un-


deceive the poor child by whatever refined and tender method you can devise, so long as it be unmistakable; and she will leave your house, suffer for a time, and ultimately get over it. But you must not leave a remnant of false hope to fester in her heart. The drowning catch at straws, and there is no saving for her unless she can banish your image absolutely from her mind."

Lord Rotherhame turned his face towards her, and she saw that it was pale.

"You are right, Aunt Bessie," he said, firmly, "and I thank you for what you have said, although it has given me pain. I will do as you advise, and for the sake of one of the sweetest, noblest, and most unselfish of beings, you will give the lie to the voice, wherever you hear it raised, that could so much as take the glitter off her snow-pure honour. Do not suffer it ever to be whispered that she wasted a thought on my most worthless self."

"Trust me, Ken, I will be your friend in all things!" and with this assurance, warmly uttered, aunt and nephew rose, as by one consent, and parted company.

The Duchess watched her nephew's slender, stately form, as he stood for a moment silent and abstracted among a crowd of strangers, among whom, she thought, with a semi-maternal pride, his beauty alone sufficed to make him solitary. She was watching with a half-amused, half-ironical scrutiny the



troubled look that darkened his face, when a greeting from her host diverted her attention. A moment after her eyes moved again towards the direction he had taken, but Lord Rotherhame had disappeared.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

I could a tale unfold  
Whose lightest word would harrow up your soul.  
SHAKESPEARE.

It was not yet eleven o'clock when Lord Rotherhame re-entered his house. The servants were prolonging underground the libations of the supper-hour, the ladies were in bed, and the hall-porter, nodding in his great chair, roused himself with difficulty to admit his master. He turned into the library, where a reading-lamp burned on the writing-table with a subdued and classic light.

Pain was gnawing at his heart, the pain of self-reproach, dashed also with a sense of personal loss. In this room he had a few hours since sat talking alone with Geraldine—the last of those pleasant interviews in which their thoughts had mingled, and her heart had opened to his, fresh and fragrant as a dewy June rose. To-morrow he must tread on the fair flower, stab the heart that trusted in him, draw a dull cloud of pain over eyes that had given him naught but brightness. He felt afraid, sick with a miserable dread, and turned desperately from the contemplation of the future to seek shelter in slumber. Sitting in the scarlet arm-chair, from which

she had reviewed his character that morning, he fell asleep in the midst of his meditation.

As he slept, the storm increased. Heaven woke up, and from abysmal depths of space a sound arose like the swell of a trump of doom. When the skies break silence—the enduring skies that mutely watch man's sin—they are terrible. Their aspect is menace, fulmination, fury—they do not remonstrate, they condemn. The veil of the inscrutable is lifted : heaven stands revealed in a blaze of wrath ; man shrinks before an angry God. But it is because his stature is puny, his physical powers small, his senses narrow, that man finds the shout of the heavens terrible. They are stronger than he, have mightier lungs, a throat of infinity. And so he trembles at their bellow, fancying it to be a threat of Deity—he knows not that God is making a concert for the angels.

Music is an abstraction, a soul ; and like all other souls, must have an outward form through which to express itself. It is God's thought—the song of birds, the organ's sea of sound, the passionate violin, the confused harmonies of water, the thunder and the tempest, are the instruments by which it speaks. Let us stand in Creation's vestibule, and, remembering whence we came, take courage to enjoy the orchestra of the spheres, whose audience is angels and spirits of the air.

There are times when the human soul, out

of tune with sunny skies and tranquil brightness, finds tumult its fittest lullaby. L~~o~~  
Rotherhame's spirit was perturbed, her~~o~~  
the sympathy of Nature soothed him.  
slumbered on, undisturbed by the peals t~~h~~  
broke over the house, by the stormy rush~~ing~~  
of the awakened wind, by the flashes t~~hat~~  
jagged and lurid, ravaged earth and tore the  
sky, by the wild surging of a million leaves.  
But his sleep was agitated, as the sleep of  
exhaustion, produced by abnormal mental  
activity, often is. While in body he remained  
motionless in his chair, his elbow on the  
library table, his cheek resting on his hand,  
his spirit wandered away and stood silent  
and thoughtful in the old church at home.  
Rotherhame Church, it was, undoubtedly,  
although, transformed by the disembodied  
vision that beheld it, it wore a strange and  
unfamiliar aspect. The walls had, as it  
were, put on decrepitude, and were bent  
and mouldy. The grass in the churchyard  
had grown so long that its rank, coarse  
blades peeped in through the windows, and  
the yew trees, blacker and denser than  
of old, threw a profounder gloom over aisles  
and nave. Dark bats whirled through the  
dusky air, perched on the rood-screen, or  
blindly skimmed the monuments; huge  
insects trailed slowly over the dusty covers  
of Bibles and Prayer Books.

A congregation was assembled to witness  
marriage-rites. The bridegroom, who, with

his back towards them, stood before the altar, and who wore court dress and the Order of the Garter, was himself—Kenelm, Earl of Rotherham. By his side was Geraldine Egerton, dressed in white, and wearing over her veil a wreath of orange blossom. Excitement rendered her hysterical, and he noticed that in the effort to restrain her tears she made ugly grimaces, which every moment increased in intensity, till her whole face writhed in repulsive contortions.

The altar hangings were of threadbare, dusty velvet, like those in the dungeon oratory, and from time to time they stirred as if someone moved within them. Why the sight of that altar should make him shudder he did not understand, until suddenly it struck him that its outline, horribly familiar, was the outline of a coffin!

Meanwhile the congregation steadily enlarged, and as, one by one, the new-comers dropped in and took their seats, they stared, whispered, and made odd signs to one another. With a vague repugnance, as at something wrong, he perceived among them the faces of various villagers whom he had known in infancy, and who had long since died. In particular, he recognised an old workhouse woman, whose corpse his nurse in his childish days had surreptitiously taken him to visit, and who, with a jaw-cloth round her chin and a night-cap on her head, sat mopping and mowing, with her skinny fingers pointed



at the altar. Further back, in a seat by herself, enveloped in a chilly, death-like vapour, and still and colourless beneath her veil of grey, was his dead wife. His heart sank as he beheld her, and he asked himself how it came that she had risen from her fast-nailed coffin! how all these long buried dead had freed themselves from dust to breathe the upper air again! Then he for the first time became aware that the vaults were open, and the pavement disfigured with dark and yawning gaps. The living portion of the congregation appeared but slightly disconcerted by the reappearance of their departed brethren, and merely kept a little apart, by tacit consent leaving them to themselves.

Suddenly the weird silence was broken by the harsh clang of the church-bell, which—hoarse and cracked as from extreme old age—to his secret dismay, began to toll. A whisper arose, “The priest is come!” and with a kind of yelp, one—clad in a blood-red gown—leaped nimbly forth from beneath the altar. He waved his long, lean arms on high, then, with a yell of triumph, tossed out a hempen cord and caught the bridegroom’s head within its noose. There arose a strange hubbub; the walls shook as from an earthquake, the veiled form in the rear wrung its hands, and weeping, glided from the church—and amidst the universal laughter, the jeering of the bride, and the gurgling of his own

losing throat, he saw that his clay-hued recutioner wore the features of the man seen beneath the street-lamp in the waking moments of two hours ago.

Lord Rotherhame awoke, the perspiration a large, cold beads upon his brow. Scarcely freed from the phantasmagoria of his ghastly dream, and bewildered by the thunder-crash which at that moment broke above the house, he was allowed no leisure in which to recover his mental equilibrium. The door opened, as he returned to consciousness, and a footman entered, with the words—

“If you please, my Lord, a gentleman has sent in this card, and he says he will be much obliged if your Lordship will see him for a few minutes on private business of importance.”

Lord Rotherhame glanced at the card.

“Mr. Middleton,” he said to himself, who on earth is Mr. Middleton? Close the windows, James, and show the gentleman in.”

James obeyed, and a moment later introduced the visitor. Lord Rotherhame had a faculty for remembering faces, and the stranger’s struck him as not wholly unfamiliar. Something also about its extreme ravinity aroused his interest, and he fixed on him a scrutinizing glance.

“Pray sit down,” he said, politely placing a chair, “and tell me how I may be of service to you.”

“I must apologise for disturbing your

Lordship so late. Can I make sure of half an hour's uninterrupted conversation?"

"Certainly," returned Lord Rotherhame, with a vague astonishment at the tremulous earnestness of his visitor's manner. "I have just come home, and the business of the day is over. I think we have never met before?"

"Not to speak to each other. I saw your Lordship last February on the Wolf's Eye Rocks, the night of the great gale."

"Indeed! Yes, I think I recall your face. To-night's storm promises to be even worse. It is well we are not on the Wolf's Eye Rock at present."

A flash passed through the room as he spoke—a flash which quivered like the tongue of a snake in spasms.

"I fear my business will be unwelcome to your ears, Lord Rotherhame. You must prepare yourself for a blow!"

Lord Rotherhame's heart staggered a moment, then resumed its tranquil beat. All he cared most for in the world were safe under his roof—the solitary absent object of his love safe where Time's shocks could not assail her. That knowledge was the one palliative in the otherwise unmixed misery of her loss.

"Who are you?" he asked, with sudden imperiousness.

"*A man who knows the secret of your life!*"

Lord Rotherhame's face turned white, and then flushed deeply. But his eyes did not

droop beneath the steady gaze that Henry Middleton had fixed upon them—he sat erect, and returned it haughtily.

There was dead silence in the library. Middleton had not miscalculated the effect of his unlooked for attack. Suddenly the guilty secret that he had buried deep within, arose and took voice and shape before Lord Rotherhame. Confronting him in this attitude of menace, no longer quiescent, his *own* no more, he knew not how to meet it.

“Explain yourself, if you please,” he at last said, coldly. “I am not expert at guessing riddles.”

“Then I will speak plainly, Sir Kenelm Harold. I am one who know you for a usurper and a murderer; for a man who for the sake of rank and gold has sold his own soul, who is spending the money of a defrauded orphan, and who must answer to a righteous God for that and for her father’s blood. You are a murderer, Sir Kenelm Harold!”

Men of strong individualities are proof against influences which to minds of feebler make are terrifying. Perhaps Middleton’s rather theatrical address was not up to the mark of a highly cultivated dramatic taste; at all events, whatever impression had been made on Lord Rotherhame by his first bold statement, wore off during his more elaborate second speech. His features resolved themselves into a tranquil smile.

"Do not repeat that language in the streets, Mr. Middleton, or you may find yourself involved in trifling difficulties under the libel statute. Where did you pick up this quaint theory about me, if I may ask the question?"

His tone, gentle as if he were quieting the gabble of a harmless idiot, brought an angry red to the cheek of Middleton.

"In God's name, do not be cutting jokes on such a subject," he exclaimed, relapsing into a more natural manner. "Cool and self-possessed as you sit there, facing me with a lie on your lips, I know that you are haunted man. The memory of the murderer does not moulder. There is a shadow which darkens your home, and spreads its secret misery through your life—the shadow of the man butchered through selfish greed on Culpepper Heath. Do not comfort yourself, my Lord, by the fallacious quibble that you were not the actual assassin. If you were too delicate to soil your own hands with blood, yours was the brain that planned the deed. The risk of the thing and its dirty work were paid for out of the victim's pocket."

"A truce to this!" interrupted Lord Rotherhame, sternly. "If your sole object, Mr. Middleton, is to pour forth a farrago of unintelligible nonsense—for what you are driving at I am at a loss to understand—you must find another listener. Tell your story

when and where you please, only not in my library."

"Am I so very unintelligible, Lord Rotherhame?" said Middleton, bitterly. "Has it altogether slipped your memory that five years ago a man was murdered at your gates? Will you dare to affirm, as in the presence of God, that you had no hand in that affair?"

"I have a hand in a murder! and in the murder of my own foster-brother, a poor, harmless peasant, against whom I had never harboured an adverse thought! How, in Heaven's name, can you have become possessed of such a notion? You seem an honest, well-meaning man. I cannot feel so much anger at your charge as blank amazement."

"Do not waste your sentiment on the 'poor, harmless peasant,' my Lord; I can introduce you to some one who can, perhaps, soothe your sorrow for him."

He struck the table three times loudly with his fist, and a moment later the door was opened from without, and a tall, stout man, of middle-age, walked into the room.

All his soul came into Lord Rotherhame's eyes. Brought thus to the surface, it seemed a sensitive, shrinking thing, that suffered at every point. For this new visitor was the executioner of his dream, the apparition that had scared him under the lamp-post—the man supposed by the British public to be at

that moment rotting six feet deep in the mould of Rotherhame churchyard, hapless victim of a murderer's knife.

"Charles!" he said, and his voice was thrilled with a deep and passionate reproach.

It seemed to touch some answering chord in the new-comer's heart. He hung his head, and kept his eyes rivetted upon the ground.

"Well, my Lord," exclaimed Middleton, with fierce irony, "does my farrago become more intelligible now that you see me in company with the person who has received your pay for pretending to be dead? Why did you wish the world to think that the murdered man was a poor peasant? Was it because you shrank from having it known that he whom your servant butchered had claimed your earldom? Why did you fix upon Charles Weedon to lend his name to the corpse, and pay him a thousand pounds for the timely loan? Shall I answer for you? Partly because he, being a deserter, had personal reasons for not wishing to show his face at home; mainly because his mother was the one person whom you could trust to forswear herself in your behalf."

Scarcely heeding—at all events, scarcely appearing to heed—Middleton's taunts, Lord Rotherhame had, while he spoke, kept his large, mournful eyes fixed on Weedon's face. The man, born of one who had served and loved his race with that strange, passionate,

unselfish fidelity which servants share with noble animals, felt ceaselessly the influence of this gaze. He had not a word to say, and his uneasiness appeared every moment to increase.

"Sir Kenelm Harold," began Middleton again, when he found that he met with no rejoinder, "I came here to-night in no ill-will. I know that human nature is weak and evil, that the reckless passion of youth may hurry a man into a crime whose consequences must blacken all his after life. Looking at you, I cannot believe, whatever your guilt, that conscience is altogether dead. The documents by which your evil deed may be even yet partially undone are in your hands. I come to demand them of you in the name of the dead, who cannot speak—in the name of God, the All-Seing Judge and Father of Men. A day is coming when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, and the white mask of successful hypocrisy dragged from the face of crime. Anticipate that day! undo your damning wrong. Restore freely her stolen rights to the lawful Countess of Rotherhame. Fly to some distant land, and there, by prayer and penitence, and a life of good deeds, seek the mercy of an offended Maker, and prepare for a coming eternity."

"Never having committed the infamous crime you lay at my door, I do not see how I am to repent it. From whom had you your story?"



"Not from me," muttered Charles Weedon between his teeth.

"I was the rightful Earl's intimate friend. I am a lawyer, and I investigated the papers by which he meant to prove his identity. I saw him start for England full of high health and hope. I cannot ask HIM back from you. You could take his life, but you cannot restore it, nor make his maimed, wounded body live again. But I do demand of you, as you hope for salvation, that you resign to his child her lawful inheritance. Is it worth the price you paid for it—peace, honour, a quiet conscience? Do you find pleasure in luxuries bought with a brother's blood?"

"It is useless for me to repeat what I have already told you, Mr. Middleton," returned Lord Rotherhame, with cold forbearance, "that I am not in any way responsible for your friend's untimely fate. He never honoured me with his confidence, nor acquainted me with the claim which, rightly or wrongly, you tell me he put forth. My patience is exhausted. I respect your grief, but am not in a position to offer you consolation."

"You dare to assert your innocence in the presence of the very person whose name you substituted for your murdered uncle's?"

"Pardon me, I had nothing to do with establishing the identity of the murdered man; I was never even examined at the inquest. The mistake—if mistake there

was — originated with Charles Weedon's mother."

"Can you deny that you offered Charles Weedon hush-money to keep away and let the public believe that he had been killed? Come, don't stand there like a stock," he added impatiently, turning to Weedon; "you will swear to his cheque for a thousand pounds, will you not?"

"'Tis true enough," muttered Weedon, hoarsely.

"I must speak to you alone," said Lord Rotherhame, rising and laying his slender hand on Weedon's arm. "To one of your blood I will say what I cannot to a stranger. Will you come with me, Charles?"

"I don't care if I do," was the reply.

Middleton looked with sudden fear at his companion, whose expression, half-sullen, half-apologetic, was, in his opinion, by no means such as the occasion demanded. He saw in a moment that it would not do to expose him to the dangerous influence of the guilty man.

"On no account," he exclaimed. "It is an insult to this honest fellow to attempt to cajole him by bribes into shirking his duty. I see your game, my Lord."

"He is a free man, I think, sir?" said Lord Rotherhame. And then casting on Weedon a glance of gracious sweetness that was like a spell, he repeated: "Will you come aside with me?"

"This is infamous!" cried Middleton.  
"Refuse his insulting overtures flat!"

"Now, look you here, Mr. Middleton," said Weedon, sullenly, "I've come all the way from 'Meriky' for to oblige you and do your business, and I'll keep to my engagement, but I'll not take orders from you nor from anybody else. As his Lordship wants to speak a word to me, I am not going to be the one to say him nay."

Middleton saw that he could as soon influence an ox as his stubborn confederate. He gave in with a sigh.

"Go then," he said, "or stay; I'll wait for you in the hall outside, with his Lordship's leave. But don't let him tamper with you if you've an ounce of self-respect. Fling his paltry bribes back in his teeth like a man!"

"Don't you bother yourself," was the ungracious rejoinder.

And Middleton left the room, his heart heavy with anxiety.

## CHAPTER XIX.

In the corrupted currents of this world  
Offence's gilded hand may put by justice ;  
And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself  
Buys out the law, but 'tis not so above.

SHAKESPEARE.

LORD ROTHERHAME laid his hand on Weedon's arm, and drawing him forward to the light, scrutinized his face in silence.

"Time has changed you," he said, "but I still recognize the features of the boy who used to play with me. Do you remember our first game of cricket, Charles, and the dark, windy night when my father lay dying, and I, desperately frightened, was sobbing in my bed ? The servants were all far off, gathered round his door, and had forgotten all about me ; but you heard me, and came creeping into my room, and held me in your arms till I dropped asleep. I used to look on you as a great hero in those days, you were so big and strong ; and especially I admired you when you enlisted, and I saw you for the first time in your scarlet uniform."

"I remember," answered Charles ; "you were a queer, clinging sort of little chap. I used to think you were more like a bird in those days than a martial boy. You had a way of calling me your big brother, but I 'spose you have forgotten all that now."

"Could I forget it when to your mother—mine and yours—I owe life and love? But for her I should have died in childhood, died of sheer neglect and loneliness. Her kindred is mine—her son my brother. We have not met since the days of our boyish friendship. Are you come to ruin your brother, Charles?"

A strange emotion seized the rough settler. He had so long been dwelling in a Republican land, and among people his equals and inferiors in birth and education, that the power which a gentleman wields over the uneducated came upon him with all the added force of novelty. Honoured, touched that one so great should stoop to associate him in fraternal words with himself, the old feudal instinct waked once more. He felt as though he were the guilty man and Lord Rotherham an innocent and injured victim.

"I hadn't never dream't of coming back," he said. "For one thing, I'd no wish to risk myself among these blessed British bobbies, for I've always kept myself respectable out there. For another thing, I've always had a weakness for you, my Lord; and I'd no wish, I'm sure, to hurt a hair of your head. But of late, things have been going martial hard with me. I've got into debt, and my wife and kids haven't known where to turn for a bit of bread. We was near being sold up, and that would have broke my poor girl's heart, when of a sudden I sees this here Mr.

Middleton's notice in the paper, asking for me by my old name, and saying that if Charles Weedon would communicate strictly confidential with his brother Edward, I should hear of something to my advantage. So I writes to Ted and he to me, and then—I can't rightly say how it come about—but they sent us relief to stave off the bailiff, and promised more, and—I come to England as they wanted me to, and so here I am."

"I cannot wonder," said Lord Rotherhame, sadly; "the bravest hearts turn coward when wife and children feel the bite of want. Necessity is a hard mistress! But why did you keep your difficulties from me? Did you not know that I would never leave your mother's son to want while I had a shilling left to give?"

"I'd no mind to be a bloodsucker, Lord Berkeley," said Weedon, involuntarily reverting to the name under which he had known his young master in earlier days. "I know there are many chaps, and they holding their heads high enough too, who would turn a bit of knowledge like mine to profit, and make a living by what they could squeeze out of a fellow-creature's fears. To have written to you for help would have been as good as to threaten you, and would have brought down my old mother's hairs with sorrow to the grave. It's gone mighty hard against me to come to England now, but I was talked over, and pressed and pressed by

they folk and my wife, till I couldn't stand up agen' it, and gave way to content 'em all. And now I'm here, I'd give a year of my life not to have took their money, and to be free of the job."

"You can return it, Charles. Happily, I have no difficulty about supplying your necessities."

"'Tain't that, Lord Berkeley; but a fellow's in conscience bound to keep to his engagements. I've given my word to Mr. Middleton that I'll stand by him, and I can't go from it."

"Very well, Charles, you must do as you think right. Without your word my enemies are powerless against me; but I will never urge you to any sacrifice for me to which your heart does not incline you. To your generous forbearance I owe a long respite of comparative peace. I trusted you as I trust my own soul. Even now I know that you are sorry for me, sorry for the sake of 'Auld Lang Syne' and of our boyish love."

"I was hard put to it, and they talked me over," muttered Weedon, in thick, low tones.

"I know it. Hunger and debt are the canker of honour. For how much have you sold me?"

There was a pause. Weedon could not command his voice to answer.

"I could face ruin," said Lord Rotherhame, speaking low and deeply, "but it hurts me that it should come from you."

He paused, and again suffered his eyes to rest on Weedon. They were soft and sad as a wounded deer's.

"Mine own familiar friend in whom I trusted," he murmured, as if speaking to himself, then turned away, and with a keen look of pain, motioned Weedon to leave him.

The great burly man remained rooted to the spot. Tears were rolling down his furrowed cheeks.

"I can't do it, and that's the long and short of it," he exclaimed at last, in broken accents. "Don't turn from me like that, Lord Berkeley; you called me your brother just now! I'll not be the man to sell my brother! I'll throw every farthing of their rotten money into the river first. It's not for a pettifogger like that there Middleton that I'll throw over a gentleman like you."

He was at Lord Rotherhame's side pleading, as it seemed, his own cause; and with a look almost of supplication, seized the hand with which his foster-brother shaded his eyes. In his rough palm it looked white and delicate as a woman's. Weedon contemplated it with reverential tenderness.

"You're not much different to when you was a little chap," he said. "Oh, I did cherish you then!"

Lord Rotherhame lifted his eyelids slowly, and with a look akin to love, gazed into the ugly, faithful face that bent over him. He



drew away his arm, and for one moment flung it round his old companion's neck.

"We are friends," he said.

"Till death ! You may trust me, my Lord—like you said—as you would trust your own soul. But how am I to get out of this accursed scrape ?"

"Have you my letter ? the first I wrote on this business, and my mother's also ? You have not let them out of your keeping ?"

He spoke with a feverish eagerness.

"They're safe, my Lord, I thank heaven. I've never given them into his charge."

He drew a small soiled packet from his waistcoat and handed it over. Lord Rotherhame glanced through its contents hastily, and gave it back.

"Will you burn it ?" he asked.

Weedon placed a corner of the envelope over the lamp. It took fire ; he threw it on the grate, and it slowly consumed to ashes.

"And now," said Lord Rotherhame, "you must put yourself beyond the reach of your persecutors. To return direct to America would not be wise ; they would not let you escape them without a fight, and would pursue you into your cabin." He took up a paper and ran his eye over the shipping intelligence. "This will do," he said, at last ; "the 'Windsor Castle' leaves the Docks to-night at three for Hamburg. From Hamburg you can cross to New York. Stay, I must give you your passage money."

He got out his keys, and rapidly opening a bureau full of drawers, took out a bundle of bank-notes. These he put into Weedon's hand; it closed upon them with unwilling hesitation.

Lord Rotherhame drew his signet ring from his finger. It was a single ruby, large and bright, and its rich red reflected back the lamp light as he gave it to Weedon.

"This is a pledge of our true friendship," he said, the sad melody of his voice falling on the man's ears with the solemnity of a prophecy; "a pledge that henceforward we are so truly brothers that whether in money, counsel, or personal sacrifice, we may accept, without humiliation, service from one another. I swear to you that I honour and trust you too entirely for any thought of bribe or reward to contaminate my free and loving gift to you. And now go out by the side door. You will find yourself in a small passage, at whose right angle is the garden entrance. This key will let you out. From the garden a path leads straight to the front of the house. Take the first Hansom you see, and drive to the Docks. Do you understand?"

"I do. One thing before I go," and the big man hesitated like a shy schoolboy. "You and we were brothers, didn't you?"

"I did."

"Well then, let me do as I used when we two went out birdnesting together. Let

me call you Kenelm once, as a brother should."

Lord Rotherhame held out his hand with a sudden, strange smile.

"Good-bye, my brother," he replied.

Weedon seized it, and imprinted on it a rough, strong kiss.

"Good-bye, Kenelm," he said, and the next moment he was gone.

Lord Rotherhame closed the door behind the fugitive. Devotion shown to himself touched him with peculiar emotion. He did not look for it in a world in which conscience made him feel a very Ishmael, and when it was offered him he was grateful with a passionate gratitude. For this reason his dogs were dear to him as kindred.

A kind of elation seized his spirits. Never before had his guilty secret sat so lightly on his breast. While it was his own exclusively, while he was able at his free will to keep it or make it known, while it remained with himself alone to decide whether the false fair front should be worn before the world, and no one had power to snatch it from him, his responsibility had tortured him. He had often felt that confession could scarcely exceed in horror the secret scourge of a wrong consciously persisted in. But it was a different thing to contemplate as a possible contingency the voluntary shriving of his own soul, and to permit his crime to be torn violently from its hiding-place and dragged by other

hands into the blaze of justice. He had fought for the privilege of keeping his scorpion to himself; the sharp counter-change of wits with his declared enemy had warmed his blood; he had vanquished against odds, and now felt all the triumph and pride of victory. A flush of exultation of another kind kindled also within him; he had conquered a human heart.

A moment's reflection sufficed to show him the complete overthrow of his adversary. While the stolen documents were in his own hands, while the place of Peter Tibbetts' retreat was undreamed of, save by two who were true as steel, and since Weedon himself had deserted to his cause, his position was impregnable. Middleton, with all his knowledge, and all his just wrath, and black suspicions, was powerless against him. With his blood yet tingling, and wearing the proud smile of a victor on his lips, Lord Rotherhame opened the library door and walked into the hall. What did he behold there, that made the smile die away, and chilled his warm blood to ice? What, that made him shiver and turn faint, and that sent a dizzy rush into his brain? He saw Ralph—his boy, his heir—in close converse with Henry Middleton.

A mist blinded his eyes, and he could not see how the boy's face looked. Had the worst calamity befallen him?—could it—oh, could it be!—that his enemy had blackened

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him to his own child? There are some misfortunes which the soul repudiates, and this proud man rejected this deep humiliation as a something too bitter for mortal palate to endure.

"Where is Charles Weedon?" asked Middleton, in a voice which, though quiet, quivered with mingled dread and menace. "What have you done with him I ask, sir?" he repeated, as Lord Rotherhame kept silence.

"Come in here, Mr. Middleton," said Lord Rotherhame, in a tone as calm and natural as he could assume, "I have a word to say to you."

Middleton dashed forward, and looked in at the library door. Lord Rotherhame followed and tried to close it between himself and Ralph. Middleton saw the empty room, the unlocked money-box, the open side door, and the truth flashed on him.

"You have outwitted, outbought me this time, you devil!" he shouted, "but as there is a God in Heaven, I will bring you to justice yet!"

Lord Rotherhame with a quick motion forced him into the room, and would again have shut the door, when he found an obstacle in his way. He looked back and saw Berkeley, his fingers on the handle, scared-looking and ghastly.

"Go upstairs, Berkeley," he said; and added in a hurried, anguished whisper, "don't you see that this poor creature is off his

head? Leave me to manage him, and go at once!"

But Middleton seized Berkeley by the arm.

"You understand what your father has done!" he cried. "Outbribed my witness, robbed me of my last resource!"

Ralph, at a stamp of his father's foot, attempted to disengage his arm. Lord Rotherhame turned on Middleton with a paralysing flash.

"Let go my son, this instant, or I will give you in charge to the police!"

"Go then!" said Middleton, but still holding the boy's sleeve with a grasp of despair, "and remember what I have told you, and God deal with you according as you deal with the fatherless and defenceless child whose wrongs He has given you to right."

He released his arm, and Ralph walked away without a word.

"You have dared to carry your lies to him, you infamous trickster?" burst out Lord Rotherhame when the door was shut, and his voice high and shrill rose almost to a scream. There is a nerve centre in the soul as in the body, and Middleton, though defeated, had his revenge—it was into this nerve centre that he had plunged his knife.

"I have told your son the truth," he returned, with involuntary solemnity. "You have worsted me, Sir Kenelm, you have triumphed over the weak—to the world you remain Earl of Rotherhame, the great and

honoured peer whose charities call forth popular acclamation. I need not wish you worse retribution than the gnawing of your own conscience, and the furious wrath of the orphan's God ! Drag your son with you to share your damnation if you will. He can never again plead ignorance, since what he has learnt to-night. If he goes to hell, it is with open eyes."

" You have done your petty worst, sir—how petty you scarcely know since you dream that Lord Berkeley will believe your word against his father's. Leave my house ! "

He opened the door and motioned Middleton to go. Again the lightning flashed its tortured course through the room, and a peal that might have waked the dead shook the house to its foundations.

" It is well," said Middleton. " I came to you as a messenger of repentance. I shake the dust of this house from my feet, and leave you to God." He moved forward, and the next moment the heavy slam of the street door told that he was gone.


Middleton walked away into the night, baffled, trembling, yet with a certain sense of peace. He had discharged the duty to which Providence had called him ; he had done his utmost, and might now cease from his struggle against the tide of impossibility. Hell's gates are strong enough at times to prevail against a righteous man. He had brought from the other end of the world the single

being who could be of real service to his dead friend's interests, and had confronted him with his murderer. On that cast he had staked his all, and had failed. Before his very eyes, under the influence—the accursed influence—of rank and personal charm, Weedon had again turned deserter. Middleton was well aware that it would be now idle for him to attempt to bring a case against Lord Rotherhame. The truth, were he to proclaim it, would be from his obscure lips powerless to excite suspicion even, against a peer of established reputation—would, by the law of the land, be a libel, for which he might suffer condign punishment. One blow only it had remained with him to strike for the expiring cause, and he had not failed to strike it. That the young Lord Berkeley had an honourable and generous nature, he had discovered from many sources, and that he entertained a special protecting tenderness for little Dolly he had learned both from Weedon and from the family at Deerhurst. A seeming chance had thrown them in each other's way. A communicative footman, who was rather fond of enlivening his young master by little gossiping visits, had not failed to inform him of the appearance in the Hall of an odd-looking person, "old Mrs. Weedon in petticoats," who repulsed all civil advances, and bluntly declined to answer James's leading questions. Berkeley's curiosity had been roused by this description; he had risen from his bed, and



come downstairs in person to inspect the stranger, but had arrived only just in time to recognise the unmistakable Weedon features, as the man at Middleton's summons passed into the library. Not venturing to intrude into his father's sanctum, Berkeley had waited about some minutes, hoping to see the mysterious personage reappear. Middleton however had emerged instead.

Henry Middleton, as he reviewed what had taken place, felt that his communications to Lord Berkeley had been unduly hurried, and that although by every argument at his command, he had appealed to his instincts of chivalry and honour, yet it was but too probable, as Lord Rotherhame had asserted—that he would refuse to credit a charge so awful, brought by a stranger against his own father, on the fragile evidence which alone Middleton had it in his power to offer. He knew not, as the young viscount stood listening to him in proud chilling silence, that his narrative was casting a lurid light on a certain passage in his past history which had long remained an insoluble problem to him. Neither did Middleton dream, as he spoke of the stolen papers, that his hearer was in thought revisiting the obscure dungeon oratory beneath the Castle of Rotherhame, and there beholding the blood-stained knapsack which bore the murdered victim's name. He knew not how, like the once missing piece



of a child's puzzle, his unsupported tale was fitting in with the framework of Ralph's previous knowledge, and completing before his eyes a picture whose background was tragedy, whose foreground ruin.

Lord Rotherhame ascended the stairs to his son's room. He trembled as he went, and felt as though he were on the point of fainting. It was necessary to see Ralph to know what impression Middleton's story had made on him; to smother his suspicions if awakened; if necessary, to stoop to vindicate himself. The fear and humiliation of the moment gave him a cowed, unnatural look, and a livid smile involuntarily bespoke his guilt.

Ralph was seated on his bed. He also trembled in every limb, and his face was white as snow.

"Well, Ralph," said his father, drawing near, and putting his hand on the boy's shoulder, "I came to see that you were not working yourself into a panic. I was afraid that wretched lunatic might have frightened you."

Was it fancy, or did his boy's shoulder shrink as he touched it? Lord Rotherhame shivered.

"The arrant rubbish the poor fellow talked amused as much as it annoyed me," he continued; "but you were really startled, were you not?"

"A little," answered Berkeley, and he

pressed his hand, almost without knowing what he did, upon his heart, which was beating audibly.

"Silly, credulous boy! You must learn not to swallow wholesale every cock and bull story which is brought to you. Perhaps you have never heard that there is an abominable class who trade it is to trump up specious accusations against rich people, in order to wring money out of their fears if they are weak enough to heed them."

"Is there?" answered Berkeley, and his father heard him pant.

"Dear old Berkeley!" he continued, and in the extremity of his coward fear he, for the first time, played the hypocrite with his son, "you are reassured now, are you not? I shall not leave you till you can tell me that you are quite comfortable, and able to put that farrago of lies out of your head."

A sudden nervous dread took possession of Berkeley. Filled at the moment with awful doubts, which almost suffocated him with horror, Lord Rotherhame's affection sickened him. He felt instinctively that it was false, and his belief in his father shook to its base. It seemed as if the solid Earth itself were quaking and giving way beneath his feet. All was uncertainty and blank, blank dread. But at this hour, alone with this man whose hands he had been told were blood-stained, he dared not avow his doubts. Fear made a hypocrite of him also.

"O, I am all right now," he said, with a hollow affectation of cheerfulness. "The fellow's story gave me a little shock, he told it so naturally; but I shall be asleep in no time when once I get to bed.

"That's right!" said his father, and casting on him a glance of suspicious misgiving which his forced smile could not cover, he added: "Go to bed then, quick! We must be better friends in the future than we have been, Berkeley. I have been a little hard on you at times, I own. Good-night, and pleasant dreams!"

"Good-night, father!"

Lord Rotherhame felt that he had sunk lower than ever before by his words of simulated kindness to his son. A dread oppressed him that Ralph was not altogether duped, and he felt much as if he hated him. Ralph listened till his father's footsteps had died away in the quiet house, and then, flinging himself upon the floor, he groaned aloud.

## CHAPTER XX.

Of all bitter things there is nothing  
So bitter as love that is dead.

HENRY JOHN SMITH.

The time of life is short !  
To spend that shortness basely were too long.

SHAKESPEARE.

SUNDAY morning came, warm and bright, ushered in by discordant street cries from cracked throats, the jangle of church-bells and the song of birds. The great storm of the night had passed away, and except for a few scarred trees, smouldering ricks, one blackened corpse in a garret in the City, and a certain transitory freshness in the air, had left no trace. Geraldine, standing at her bedroom window, revelled in the mere sense of existence. Long shadows crept refreshingly across the shimmering lawn. The sun had already climbed high up the heavens' blue arch, and she grieved that she had not risen earlier to follow his divine ascension with duteous eyes. Could she have guessed what he beheld, when first that Sunday morning he looked into the windows of the house that sheltered her, her cheerful mood would have been strangely overcast. Heaven's light shines every day on sights whose bitter gloom baffles its effulgence, but seldom has it dawned on a sadder spectacle than this

Sabbath morn, on the wan faces, aged with pain, of the master of Rotherhame Castle and his eldest son.

Geraldine was disappointed when she met Lettice at breakfast to find that Lord Rotherhame's place was empty—and yet more when the meal drew to its close, and still he did not come. Her opportunities of intercourse with him, so far, at least, as this present visit was concerned, were numbered, and she could afford to part with none without a pang. The two previous Sundays Lord Rotherhame had come out after luncheon to rest under the trees at the far end of the lawn with Lettice and herself, and while away the afternoon in dreamy idleness. It seemed to her that they would live for ever in her memory—those drowsy golden hours spent on the grass looking up through half-closed lids into a world of sunlit green, while Big Ben marked the quarters that flitted by in chimes of mellow sweetness. Lettice, resting beside her, had pillowed her small head upon her shoulder, and Lord Rotherhame, at a few paces' distance, had read partly to himself, partly aloud, witching stanzas of Keats and Shelley, in low tones whose monotony was passion. There, haunted even in her dreams by the influence of his sad, soft eyes, she had talked and mused, and slept and listened, and felt herself in Paradise. There is a wilfulness about such hours—exquisite visitants from a fairer world

than this. They do not come by rote—they have a malicious pleasure in thwarting expectation—they light upon us when we least look for them. Geraldine resolved that this Sunday afternoon would be like its predecessors, only more delightful—rendered more intense in its long, yet brief enjoyment, by the consciousness that it was in all probability the last. Saturday next was the furthest limit to which she thought she should be justified in extending her already thrice-prolonged visit.

When breakfast was almost over Lord Rotherham at last appeared. The silver urn was still bubbling, and the table with its snowy damask covering, old Sèvres tea-cups, and fresh fruit and roses, was an object inviting to the eye. He did not seem, however, keenly alive to its attractions, kissed Lettice, and said good-morning to Geraldine with a slightly absent air. Except that he was very pale, no traces were visible of the night's terrible excitement; he had drawn on the impassive statue-look that masked all emotion. Geraldine was only vaguely suspicious of a change; he had not appeared so keenly alive to her presence as he was wont to be.

"Where is Berkeley?" he asked, as he took his seat.

"He has a bad headache, papa, and sent word that he would not come down till church time."

"A headache, has he! Did the thunder keep him awake?"

"The storm was so tremendous I dared not stay alone," said Geraldine. "I woke up in the midst of it all, and there was such an uproar that I thought the Day of Judgment must have come."

"Did you?" he answered drily and with a palpable lack of interest. "By-the-bye, I think you should all go to the Zoo this afternoon. Here are tickets enough for the whole party—you would like it, would you not, Miss Egerton?"

"But I thought," she answered hesitatingly, "we were to have one more lazy Sabbath siesta in the garden. Don't you remember last Sunday you promised to read Dante to us to-day?"

"I am sorry; but I have to ride into the country to lunch with Lady Susan Dacre. If you prefer quiet, however, I am sure Lettice will be delighted to stay at home with you."

"Oh, but papa," cried Lettice, in consternation, "you must not go away from us! Do you know this is your last chance of a Sunday reading with Geraldine? Her sister has written to say that they are coming back to London to-morrow."

"Must you really leave us to-morrow?" said Lord Rotherhame, turning to Geraldine in a tone of polite acquiescence in the inevitable. "Lettice will miss you sadly!"



"No, papa," said Lettice, with a triumphant smile, "I have been doing my best to convince her that her parents, who have her with them always, will not mind sparing her to us for a few days more, especially if *you* write and say you want her on Friday to keep Eddy's birthday."

"My dear child, you must not be exacting. Remember Miss Egerton's parents have the first claim upon her, and you should not urge her against her sense of duty to them."

"But she herself says she would not mind a bit, if"—Lettice was beginning, when Geraldine interrupted her with unusual sharpness—

"No, indeed, Lettice. You must press me no more; I want to get back to Gertrude, and I could not possibly wait beyond to-morrow."

The ready tears sprang to Lettice's eyes, but early schooled in self-control, she forced them back. Lord Rotherhame's face became more immovably statuesque than ever. He looked straight in front of him, and talked in a hard, cool tone about his projected ride to Hanover Cottage, and the messages he should carry from Lettice to Lady Susan. But it was long before he ventured on a glance at Geraldine's face. When he did, it wore a look of agony. He saw enough to know that he had been thoroughly successful, and he rose and went upstairs with a new wound open in his heart.

"Must this sin also be laid to my charge?" he sullenly asked himself.

Absorbed by still more engrossing misery, the execution of his promise to the Duchess had yet caused him anguish. It was a relief to feel the deed was done, the breach made, the worst over. But was the worst over for her as well as for himself? Might she not henceforth be doomed to experience the sickness he knew so well—the tedious, wasting sickness of a slowly breaking heart? "Fool that I am to create such chimeras for my own torment!" he thought, driving the idea from him with a shudder. "She is a very baby, has all the changeable, wayward fancies of a baby, and tears and blushes plentiful as the future lovers whom her beauty will bring around her. She will throw my memory aside as a child would throw a broken toy. Shame on me that on my wife's wedding-day I should waste a thought on any other!"

Geraldine followed Lettice mechanically into the drawing-room, where, according to custom, Miss Oliver had assembled the children to sing hymns before they went to church. Her eyes seemed blinded—not with tears, however, for they were dry. Unable to guess at even the shadow of a cause for her friend's change of bearing, she yet comprehended that that change was final, and she accepted her fate with a proud face, though with a sickening heart. Before his anger she had laid aside her pride, and stooped to seek

forgiveness for what she knew had been no fault—before his indifference, the humility of love itself was powerless. An overwhelming sense of degradation mingled with her surprise and wretchedness. Her one sick longing was to escape and hide her face among those who loved her and were ignorant of her shame.

While the little children, with parted rosy lips, stood on each side of her, singing "The Happy Land," Lettice stepped out of the circle round the piano and went softly to her father's side. He was standing in the window with his back to the room, and the girl's quick instinct told her that he was sad. She laid her soft hand upon his arm. He turned quickly, and when he saw her, put his arm about her neck and kissed her brow. In one hand he held a miniature of his wife, which he wore always next his heart. It represented a young girl, fair and slender, with the grave, sweet eyes of a Madonna shining solemnly beneath a halo of golden hair. For once Lord Rotherhame did not hastily hide his treasure. Lettice was his favourite daughter—the one who most nearly resembled her mother.

"This is our wedding day, my darling," he whispered, as she leant her head upon his shoulder.

"I know it, sweet father." She held his hand in silence for a moment, and then said

gently : " Don't you think Ralph is growing a little like our dearest mother ? "

Lord Rotherhame started, and the softness left his voice.

" Ralph like your mother, Lettice ? Your mother, God's loveliest creation ! You must, indeed, have forgotten her, if you can think that."

Lettice shrank into herself.

" Where is Berkeley, by the way ? " he inquired, looking round with a disquieted air. " Not appeared yet ? You will not be far from his room when you go to dress for church, dear ; ask him to be ready at twelve to ride with me to Hanover Cottage. Tell him the air will do him good."

Ralph did not go to church with the family that morning. But he knelt alone in his little attic and prayed God to help him as he had never prayed before. The burden of an utterly repugnant responsibility, a load heavy as lead, was laid upon his shoulders. He must bear it, fight for the loathed right without enthusiasm, without pride, simply because impelled by conscience—a monitor he dared not disregard.

There was something about this projected ride which daunted him. In the solemn light of dawn, with a beating heart, an invocation of his mother, and on his knees, he had resolved to undo that night's deceit, to uncover his true thought before his father, to

urge him to atonement. What was the significance of this resolve? To uncover his thought was to accuse his father of a base crime! To urge him to atonement was to urge him to his ruin! Were not the ends he had set before him abhorrent to every fibre of his being? and yet for their attainment he must pray, reason, agonise, supplicate. Several times he flung his cross from him as too intolerable to be borne. Several times, counting the cost, he counted it too great. Again and again he prayed in passionate helplessness that in some way or other the bitter cup might pass from him. Reason gave him to understand that it could not, unless he drank it.

Then, cold and writhing from excess of suffering, he ended the conflict and took up his hated cross. God is merciful! He inflicts that pain only which is necessary to purge and perfect each individual soul. The pains which for some are spread, here and there at intervals, over a long reach of chequered years, are concentrated for others into a year, a month, a moment of supreme agony. The throes pass, and behold a new creature—strong and patient—of proved virtue that may endure the wear of ages.

The opportunity for which he waited came upon him appallingly soon. He could not bring himself, in the short interval between Lettice's delivery of her father's message and the time of starting, to decide on any plan

of action. This he left to circumstances, to the moment's inspiration, and to God. At mid-day he went downstairs. A groom held their horses at the front door, and Lord Rotherhame met him in the hall. They did not look at one another. Berkeley had never known his father shun his eye before.

"Well, how are you now?" he asked graciously.

"I am all right, thank you."

"It is a long time since we have had a ride together. The country air will refresh you. We must ask Lady Susan to give us luncheon, and then we can return in the cool of the evening, and reach home in time for supper."

The day had clouded over when the riders left London, and a silver-grey sky lay low on a broad reach of level fields. The river flowed noiselessly between its willow-bordered banks, and pigs and cattle browsed peacefully by quiet homesteads. Ralph felt as in a bad dream, and rode on by his father's side, scarcely conscious whither they went.

"Are your wits wool-gathering?" inquired Lord Rotherhame at last. "I have spoken to you three times, and you have taken not the faintest notice."

"I beg your pardon!" and Ralph started from his apathy.

"I was speaking again of what we discussed last evening," continued his father, "my plan for ridding you of Robert Bogle."

I can well imagine you are growing tired of him."

Ralph's heart sank. The remembrance of that little episode of reconciliation, in which his father's unwonted tenderness had awakened in him a very passion of grateful love, rose with terrible vividness. How rapturously had he hailed the promised deliverance! how miserably, drearily unimportant did it now appear! But he forced himself to formal thanks. Lord Rotherham began eagerly discussing Robert's dismissal, and the pretext on which he could be dispatched home to his father.

"I may as well say to you now," he continued, with an effort which was almost too much for his pride, "how sorry I am for the estrangement that has come between us. I am afraid it has been as much owing to undue harshness on my part, as to mutual misunderstanding. I hope there will be an end to all this now, and that henceforward we shall trust and care for one another as we used to do."

"I hope so," answered Ralph, falteringly.

He paused, as if he could scarcely force himself to proceed. But the minutes were slipping away, and as yet he had not begun his task. When we must go through an ordeal, it is our truest wisdom to rush blindly in its face. Procrastination allows it to grow in horror, and horror grows fast.

"But there is one thing of more con-

sequence to me than to be rid of Robert Bogle," he proceeded, in a low, desperate voice. "I am, before all things, anxious for an explanation of what took place last night."

Lord Rotherhame paused, and a look of indescribable disquietude came over his features.

"Certainly I will give it you," he replied at last, in a tone whose frankness might well have disarmed suspicion, "as far as I understand it myself, that is. If I remember right, Berkeley, I told you long ago that I would one day explain to you the reason of my helping Peter Tibbetts to hide from the police. Such an action, being illegal, involves me in great responsibility, and although I personally do not shrink from incurring it, I am inexpressibly unwilling to harass your conscience with such a burden. However, since circumstances have led you to know so much, it would be but cruel kindness to keep you longer in doubt."

Ralph made no rejoinder, and his father proceeded after a brief silence—

"In the first instance, then, it was a sudden impulse of pity that led me, in the moment of his extreme distress, to lend a helping hand to the poor hunted wretch. But before I explain to you how I came to have the chance and means of hiding him, you must promise secrecy. I ask no pledge from you as to the other details of my story"—he dared



not risk a refusal—"but on this one point I must have your promise. It is the family secret, of which you have heard, which has been handed down in our family for generations, from father to son, and which, by rights, ought only to be told you when you come of age. Do you promise silence, Berkeley?" And, seeing his son's obvious hesitation, Lord Rotherhame continued: "You must promise it in fact, if I am to give you the explanation you ask!"

"I promise silence on this point then."

Lord Rotherhame's brow contracted wrathfully. A few hours since and Ralph would as soon have contemplated striking him as thus audaciously to limit his obedience. But he dared not give expression to his secret rage, and continued with apparent meekness—

"Secrecy on all other points I can safely leave to your instinct of honour. It so happened, then, that the day after the murder on Culpepper Heath, and just at the moment when the constables had ferretted out Tibbetts from his hiding place in the forest, I was alone in our church. I was startled by the stealthy opening of the door, and, turning, I saw the miserable creature come stumbling in, nearly spent, his blood-shot eyes starting from his head; by some unaccountable instinct he was seeking sanctuary where in these days it is no longer to be found. I had but one moment to make up

my mind. He had committed a frightful crime, but its consequences were still more frightful. He was grey-haired, and had carried me as a child in his arms—I could not find it in my heart to give him up to his hunters.” He tried, as he spoke, to suppress the inward revolting of his pride at being forced to plead his cause with his son, and assumed a tone of sentimental pity, glancing feverishly the while towards the grave young face, which showed no trace of responsive softness. “A subterranean passage connects the dungeons, where you saw Tibbetts, with our family vault. This is our hereditary secret, known only to the heads of our house and their heirs. Entrance is effected by means of a secret spring in the Red Earl’s tomb. I made use of this knowledge, and hid myself with the fugitive. His gratitude was tragical to witness. Almost maddened by fear, he implored me, with choking gasps, to save him from the horrors of an eternity for which he was not prepared. I was in a sore strait. The law treats the concealment of a criminal as a crime, and yet to give over an old man to be butchered seemed a cowardly action. My mother knew my scruples. She could not forget that Tibbetts, however guilty, had served her faithfully, and she commanded me then, and again later on her death-bed, to continue to protect him. You now understand something of the motives which prevailed with me to hide

under my own roof one who, in truth, has been to me something of a skeleton in the house. At present the responsibility of the action rests with me alone—you need give yourself no concern about it—but the day may come when it will devolve upon you to decide whether you will continue to harbour him. I think in that day you will hardly think it common humanity to hand him over, after all these years, to the executioner. And now, my boy, I hope you are satisfied?”

A fearful struggle raged in Berkeley's breast. Although a something in Lord Rotherhame's manner—a something altogether novel—oily, forced, unnatural—certified him that he was attempting to deceive, yet the filial respect, which the constant effort of the last six months had wrought, as it were, into the very fibre of his being, kept him back from throwing open doubt upon his honour.

“But why,” he said at last, “why then, since you resolved to save him, did you choose that place to keep him in? Why did you not give him money, and help him to escape beyond seas to hide himself, where, if found, his discovery would not expose you to the charge of having given shelter to a felon?”

“Consider that would have been to sentence him to almost certain death. It is scarcely possible in these days of high police-organization to evade detection. And it would have been a crime in any case to let

such a man loose upon society. Was there not a natural justice in keeping him shut up in solitude which, while it protected his neck, inflicted on him an expiation as heavy as any, except capital punishment, that judge or jury could pronounce?" Lord Rotherhame's tone grew a shade more confident as he silenced Ralph's objections with this convincing argument.

"And how about the knapsack?" cried Ralph, his voice unconsciously sharpening to shrillness.

"The knapsack?"—Lord Rotherhame turned white. "What are you talking of?"

"The knapsack which was rifled from the body—which that man last night wanted you to give up to him—which he swears contains proofs that his friend, whose murderer you are protecting, was the real Earl of Rotherhame. Father," he broke out, in tones of passionate anguish, "I know where you have hidden it! I saw it in the dungeons! It was stained with blood—oh God!—our kinsman's blood!"

Lord Rotherhame lifted his hand with a gesture of agony, clenched it, and beat the air. It was his first natural action that morning.

"It is false!" he cried, and his voice rose almost to a shriek. He was uttering a lie direct, and though fear drove him to it, the humiliation almost killed him. A gentleman tolerates a stain on his heart more readily

than on his lips. "It is false!" he repeated, and began a wild accusation of Henry Middleton. "You are no son of mine if you believe the inventions of a worthless trickster against your father's word. Cannot you see," he went on, attempting feebly to control his shaking voice, "cannot you see, that he has made a plot to get money out of me? He knows that a member of our family was once drowned at sea, and he invents the plausible story that he survived the wreck. He ingeniously fits in this falsehood with the murder of Charles Weedon, and brings the elaborate fiction to me, coupled with accusations of a nature so revolting that he hopes I may be scared into purchasing his silence."

"The murder of Charles Weedon!" repeated Berkeley, icily. "He is alive, and was in our house last night. Even the servants observed his likeness to his mother, and I should have recognised him anywhere."

"You saw him then?" Lord Rotherhame wiped the drops from his brow. "I tell you," he went on, "it is all a part of the conspiracy to ruin me. That man's accidental likeness to the Weedons has been turned to account—he has been bought in to play his false part. Could a mother be mistaken in her own child, I ask you? Nancy swore at the inquest that the body was her son's."

Ralph interrupted him.

"Then why did you not confront the man with her, and prove him a liar? Why did

you tempt him away from his associate, and induce him to make off by the back door? Pray, father, spare yourself the trouble of further elaboration. I am not quite so blind as not to notice the discrepancies in which your explanation abounds."

The next instant Ralph prepared to shelter himself from the furious blow with which he expected Lord Rotherhame to avenge the insult. But he had fallen below pride, and took his buffet in silence. His cowardly forbearance made Ralph sick. Himself it almost killed.

"Listen to me," resumed Ralph presently, in a tone in which pity mingled largely with scorn, "it is no use blinking facts; sooner or later detection must come, for surely the hand of God is against us as long as we keep possession of our ill-gotten riches. Consider what construction your conduct would bear before a law-court, should those papers be discovered in your hands. Remember that the actual murderer can be credited with no such overwhelming motive for his deed as . . . ."—he broke off gasping. "Escape while you have the chance! Let me give these papers into a lawyer's hands, and then hide—let us hide ourselves in some distant place, where no one will know our story. We can never again associate with other families—we will devote ourselves to you, and I will help you to support my sisters. We will do all we can to make your new life

endurable. Only, for God's sake, no delay! seize the chance before it has gone for ever! For my part," he went on with an access of vehement determination, "be sure of this, I will never rest till every farthing of that money has been paid back. Every bit of bread bought with it will choke me. Whatever you may do, the moment the power comes to me, restitution shall be made! For God's sake," he repeated wildly, "save me from having to blacken your name when you are dead!"

"Idiot!" muttered his father, savagely. "What would be the use of putting a bag-full of old receipted bills into a lawyer's hands? I should be fit company for you in Bedlam if I did such a thing."

"A bag-full of old bills, is it?" echoed Ralph, in bitter scorn, "you will allow me, if you please, to examine them for myself, before I renounce the conclusions to which I have been driven."

"Then, in the foul fiend's name, tell me what those conclusions are!" And as the ominous silence in which Ralph received his challenge, spoke his belief more plainly than words, Lord Rotherham shivered, and a momentary anguish convulsed his frame.

"Good God!" he said, "you must be mad in truth to credit me with such a loathsome crime! me, your own father!—no, Ralph, if all the world believed it, you could not—not you—not you—my child!"

His tone was so passionate, that it sounded like a cry. But Ralph remained unmoved. The appeals which a few hours since would have melted him to tenderness, fell now upon his heart like raindrops upon steel.

"You really humiliate yourself unnecessarily," he answered.

The hard arrogance of his tone, coming in ignorant cruelty upon a soul in mortal torture, changed Lord Rotherhame into a demon. All the fires of hell seemed to leap up within him. His eyes flamed, and he parted his lips to speak, but a sudden thought checked him. With a violence that almost made it rear, he drew back his horse and fell behind his son. Ralph marvelled to find him so quiescent; he had not seen his face, and was unconscious that he ground his teeth behind him.

Rows of red-brick villas, which, with their neat verandahs and ornamental porches, began to line the road, now recalled Ralph abruptly to everyday life.

"Let us turn back!" he cried, "it is impossible to do any visiting to-day."

"Excuse me," returned a voice from behind, so cold and changed that it could scarcely be recognised as the same which had but now appealed to him in agony for the faith he could not give, "but if you remember, we came out for the express purpose of visiting, and are now close to our destination."

Ralph looked at his father in shuddering



amazement, but he attempted no remonstrance, and quietly followed him through the street of the quaint suburban town. He was conscious of that kind of relief which is gained by obeying the dictates of conscience. Horror and disgust were merging into a quick remorse for the language he had used towards his fallen father, fallen so low as to be dependent upon his mercy for immunity from exposure and its ghastly consequences, and he now longed to show him by some word or sign that he was not at heart scornful and unfilial as he had appeared. He pulled up his horse on the bridge, and waited for Lord Rotherhame to come up with him.

"Father," he said earnestly, "you know without my telling you, that however you may choose to act, I am incapable of doing any thing that could injure you."

"I am humbly grateful," was the ironical reply.

"Do you remember," resumed Ralph, gently, "that it is your wedding day? Would you keep the miserable earthly gain, and lose the hope of seeing my mother when this short life is over?"

"Silence! I will not hear my wife's name from *your* lips. It is sacrilege."

The tone revealed such a white heat of anger that Ralph dared not add a word, and at that moment the iron gates that led to Hanover Cottage appeared in view. The horses' hoofs trod softly on the fine gravel of

the well-kept drive. The dreaded ride was over, and Ralph felt that he had reached an ark of refuge. From beyond a deep, winding maze of copper beech and deodara appeared a pretty Gothic villa, rising from a velvet lawn that sloped gently downwards to the Thames. To pass from the conflict of the fierce passions that uncivilise, to the gentle life of culture, was sweet to him, and as he inwardly thanked God that the plunge had been taken, that the awful ordeal was past, he saw with unspeakable relief that his father was drawing on a social smile and beginning to look less fearfully unlike himself. Unhappily for them both—for intercourse with a gentlewoman might have helped to exorcise the devil from his heart—Lord Rotherhame's repeated rings at the house-bell were only answered by a sleepy maid, who, appearing from some far-back region, informed the visitors that Lady Susan had been summoned to town the day before, and would not be back till the end of the week.

Ralph felt a cold thrill of disappointment. To continue longer alone with his father was an evil which he felt as if he could not face.

## CHAPTER XXI.

Changed to a foul fiend through misery.

SHELLEY.

I am amazed, methinks, and lose my way  
Among the thorns and dangers of this world.

SHAKESPEARE.

“THE horses must rest,” said Lord Rotherhame when he had left cards and turned away. “We will stop at the first inn, and give them a drink before we turn homewards.”

They had not far to go. The Blue Boar showed a hospitable front on the village green; the landlord gave his new guests a hearty welcome, and ushered them into his inner sanctuary—a musty parlour looking on the river, and garnished with horsehair furniture and modern cheap engravings. New milk, ham, and rolls were promptly offered, and the two were left to solace themselves with expectations till the desired preparations were complete. Lord Rotherhame stretched himself languidly on the hard sofa, and Ralph sat on the window-seat, watching the even flow of the silvery river, and taking a dream-like interest in the canoes and pleasure boats that glided by. Again the veil was lifted from the face of heaven. The blue sky mirrored itself in the shining waters, and the sunlight kissed its ripples. The

scene was so fair, so gentle and harmonious, that by a strange contradiction Ralph, albeit overhung by the shadow of an immense calamity, found himself revelling in its tranquil beauty. Why, oh why, was the world so bright, and human life so dark and rough?

Presently his father, who appeared fatigued, and who had been lying with his face to the wall, turned round, told him to order the horses for six o'clock and to amuse himself as he pleased in the meanwhile.

Ralph, thus released, strolled out into the little town. His brain, exhausted, recoiled from the miserable effort of thought—he accepted passively the rest and sweetness of the hour. The streets were alive with City holiday-makers—smoking youths, set free for the nonce from close shops and dingy counting-houses, ladies in all varieties of blues and greens, children carrying enormous bouquets of wallflowers and boy's love. Ralph followed them with his eyes, caught fragments of their chat, was conscious of a secret sympathy attracting him towards them, and yet felt himself a very alien. The soft sky, turquoise blue with a transparent veil of luminous clouds, stretched above his head. He looked up, and wished that he were sailing on that waveless sea, among the cloud-islands of air and gold, towards the still glory of the sacred west. Life was so hard—salvation so remote—the way thereto so difficult—a slip so easy. Perhaps his late experience of

earthly fatherhood had in some measure darkened his conception of his Heavenly Parent, and it may have been from some such cause that he was ever fearing that "God would be extreme to mark what was done amiss." Man was created to be God's image upon earth—woe to him who by harshness or injustice desecrates the blessed reality, whose symbol and sacrament he is.

The church clock striking six broke in on Ralph's meditations, and the recurring strokes sounded like a knell of doom in his unwilling ear. It was difficult to explain why, but a vague presentiment of coming ill began to haunt him, and he was seized by an inexplicable longing that the ride back to town were over, and he safe housed once more. His father was standing at the inn-door, paying his reckoning, and Ralph heard him inquire of the landlord whether he could recommend any way back to London across the turf, by which they would be spared the dust and crowding of the high-road. The landlord could tell his Lordship of no direct track, but suggested that by cutting across the common, and passing through some hay-fields to the right, he might make an agreeable circuit before regaining the high road at a point he indicated.

So the two remounted, trotting slowly down the old-fashioned street in the late sunshine of the Sabbath afternoon, till they reached the fragrant gorse-grown common,

where the horses, their noses turned home-wards towards the vast shadow of distant London, and their hoofs touching the springy turf, started off into an exhilarating canter. The ground flew beneath their feet, and Ralph scanned the horizon with wistful impatience to catch the first glimpse of the spires and chimneys of the great populous metropolis, between which and himself the distance every moment lessened sensibly. In his father's presence all power of enjoyment forsook him. The evening air was balmy, and stirred the leaves of oaks and elms as musically as ever. Little gold and crimson clouds rocked themselves gently in an abyss of light around the sinking sun, and the sky looked warm and friendly, as though it would fain lure weary mortals to ascend, bathe their souls in peace, and explore the glad mysteries of heaven. But Ralph no longer lifted his eyes longingly towards it—one feeling absorbed him, a feeling of dismay at the long reach of lonely country that stretched before them, unexplained yet most intense. It grew so strong at last that he roused himself to break the long silence, and suggested to his father that they should strike to the left and regain the high road, still faintly visible at a distance of some two miles.

"It will be getting dark before long," he said, "and our road seems so lonely that if we once miss the way it will not be easy to find anyone to set us right, and we shall

lose more time in the end than if we retrace our steps at once."

"Why in such a hurry?" returned Lord Rotherhame, with a smile, whose meaning Ralph was unable to catch. "I should have thought you would have wished to prolong your ride on such a lovely evening. See how placidly the broad red sun descends towards the horizon, and how darkly blue the smoke from those cottage windows shows against the glowing sky. You have not been so much in my company of late that you need be in a hurry to curtail our little expedition. Who knows, Berkeley, when we two shall have the chance of another ride together?"

The Future answered that question for Ralph, and it answered "Never!"

"Do you not think?" resumed Lord Rotherhame, and he drew nearer to his son, and spoke with insinuating softness, "that it is pleasant to be alone with me now that we have come to an *explanation*, and have been so delightfully confidential and ingenuous, and have come to understand each other so completely?"

They were entering a wide sloping field, shut in on all sides by hedges. A small group of hayricks rose in the centre, and a few brown cows nibbled the sparse, sweet grass. In the distance loomed the mighty smoke-cloud of London, and the blood-red sun had begun to dip below the distant hills. Before and behind spread a net-work of

lonely fields, and the sounds of far-off human life and tinkling church-bells were borne faintly on the tranquil air. Ralph saw and heard all this, and then with a dim and dark foreboding looked up into his father's face. Was it a gleam from the sinking sun which kindled that lurid red in his eyes, or were they glowing with the inward glare of unhallowed fires? Instinctively, Ralph's gaze searched the horizon for any means of rescue. His father's face was livid and convulsed, and the swollen veins stood out like knotted ropes upon his brow. He scowled down on the boy's blanched face, and drew closer, slackening his speed.

"We so seldom ride together," he repeated, with a frightful smile, "that we should do well to mark this first of August in our memories as a red-letter day."

Suddenly he reined in his horse, and caught at Ralph's bridle—

"Get down," he cried, between his teeth. "Do you know what I have brought you here for?"

Ralph's voice failed him. His father's face fascinated him with the sinister fascination of a serpent. A fiend could not have appeared more treacherous or malignant. As if under some hidden compulsion he obeyed the mandate, slipped from his horse, and, following his father's example, tied it to the wooden paling that enclosed the ricks. Lord Rotherhame turned upon him with a kind



of ferocious glee that bordered on the insane.

"Soh!" he exclaimed, "soh! my dutiful, virtuous son, you think that you have caught me tripping at last, do you? and that you have me at your mercy? I am a *murderer*, am I?—and you can hold out threats of Calcraft and the gallows if I decline to jump in all things with your pious humours! Nothing could be more admirable than your conduct! Christian forbearance, combined with manly firmness. You will *insist on having justice* done, will you? You'd like to hear me crave and cringe for mercy, and then to whine out that 'private feeling must be put aside, that punishment follows guilt, and that the laws must take their course.' Come! I will whip the conceit out of you for once, you sneaking, sanctimonious, sentimental imbecile! I'll burn to tinder every fragment of those papers that you insist I shall submit to *your* inspection, and I will thrust your head back into the dust in which it has so long grovelled."

He shook his fist, and caught up his heavy whip from the ground. For the moment, rage, torture, and the devil had made him mad.

Ralph could remember nothing but that he was alone with a murderer, and, with nerves racked by the strain of the past two hours, he believed fully that his last moment had arrived. The paralysis of physical fear

yielded to the pressure of dire necessity, and he found strength to utter a cry for help. His only answer was the chirping of crickets in the grass. The fiery ball was already half-sunk behind a line of purple heights, and no human reply broke the unresponsive silence of the evening. Leaning against the rick, he cowered in the futile effort to obtain shelter, and raised his arm to protect his face. The last sight he saw before he closed his eyes was a menacing figure—a white, cruel hand raised to strike. Then a crashing blow descended with murderous force, breaking down his frail defence, and cutting open his cheek. The sudden pain, the conviction that he could expect no quarter, the deliberate aim at his head, maddened him.

Experience teaches that in moments of panic, reason is powerless against imagination. He forgot that the assailant was his father, he retained no instinct but the instinct of rage and self-defence.

“Must I stand here to be butchered!” he shouted, and then, as a second blow brought blood from his neck, he sprang up with a bound like an angry tiger’s, clutched his father unawares by the collar, hurled him down, and planting his foot upon his chest, wrenched the whip from his hand and struck at him blindly. It was the work of a moment, and the first exclamation that the prostrate man found breath to utter recalled him to his senses. It flashed upon him that he had

committed a frightful crime. A vision passed before his swimming eyes of his father lying low beneath his heel, with clenched teeth, ashy and rigid. He flung down the whip, and, sinking on one knee, prevented him from rising.

"Promise that you will not attack me if I let you go!" he panted. "I'll not trust you unless you promise."


"I make no terms," was the answer, in a hollow voice. "Let me get up, I say, and quickly."

Ralph hesitated a moment, then deliberately withdrew his knee.

"I have done wrong," he murmured. "Revenge yourself on me as you please, I will not hinder you."

Lord Rotherhame rose slowly. He looked older by ten years, and his cheeks and lips were bloodless. Ralph, holding his handkerchief against his wounded cheek, watched him in speechless suspense. But he made no sign of menace, and walking to the paling leaned a few seconds against it, gasping. Then he turned unsteadily towards his horse, and attempted to unfasten the reins. Ralph, who had followed him closely, came forward to help, for his father's eyes were dim, and his hands shook as if from palsy. Ralph loosed the knot, and said, with choking agitation—

"Forgive me! I was beyond myself. I didn't know what I did."



Lord Rotherhame looked at him with a fixed stare, then turned away and mounted silently. Ralph did the same, and once more the homeward journey was begun.

Ever after that ride appeared to Ralph like an impossible and dreadful dream; the slow progress through the fields in the grey twilight; the form before him stooping, as if from premature old age, and sometimes reeling in the saddle; the difficulty of passing through the gates; the oppression of unbroken silence; the interminable high road, which, after an endless hour, melted at last into an equally interminable street, with twinkling lamps and gaslit windows. Ralph shuddered to quit the friendly darkness that had served to hide his head—bent low beneath an ever-increasing load of shame and bitterness. He had sinned an unpardonable sin; he had lifted his sacrilegious hand against him who had given him life; he had trampled on the awful ordinance of God—the repentance of a lifetime could neither undo nor atone. He had come out that morning sworn to a great sacrifice in the cause of right; he had ended by doing an impious wrong.

By degrees the region they traversed became more familiar, the streets broader and better lighted, and well-dressed congregations began to pour from brilliantly illuminated churches, while organs sent forth their parting peals. At last the final corner

was turned, and the tall gloomy houses and waving trees of St. Jerome's Square appeared. Lord Rotherhame rode blindly forward without seeming to perceive that he had passed his door, and Ralph was forced to check him. He crept down from his saddle, feeling as though a brand were on his brow. The red-faced porter opened the door, and volunteered the information that the ladies had not yet returned from church, but that Lady Lettice and Miss Egerton were in the drawing-room. Lord Rotherhame made no answer, and walked slowly up the broad front stairs.

The porter eyed him with an apprehensive glance—

"Anything the matter with his Lordship, Lord Berkeley?" he asked, with the familiarity of an old servant. "He don't look well to-night."

"Tired from his ride, perhaps, Rogers," was the answer, and Ralph kept his face averted that the man might neither detect the look of guilt it wore nor the more palpable disfigurement inflicted by his father's hand. He stood one moment uncertain what to do or where to go, and then, pressing his hand upon his heart, sprang upstairs after Lord Rotherhame.

Lord Rotherhame turned as he was about to enter his bedroom, and found his son behind him.

"What do you want?" he asked, and his voice was masked by a kind of rattle.

"To ask you once more to forgive me, if that is possible."

"It is not possible!"

The door closed in his face, and Ralph was left alone in the dark corridor. He remained in blank stupefaction, standing where his father had left him.

A terrible amazement took possession of his mind. He felt out of his reckoning, as if some huge wave from life's ocean had, without warning, carried him out beyond his depth and left him to toss and struggle in the homeless, fathomless abyss. He looked into the past, the present, and the future, and their mystery overwhelmed him—the mystery of the weird duality of human life. He wondered, and he shuddered. There was still one spot in the house which his father's hate had turned into a hostile camp, that to-night, at least, might afford him shelter. Thither his feet turned instinctively, and when he reached his attic bedroom he at once began—scarcely realizing his motive—to examine his purse. It was empty, the last sovereign he had flung away to Robert. He opened his drawers, took out one by one photographs, trinkets, little gifts, which in past times his father had lavished on him. These he wrapped in a sheet of paper and directed them to Lord Rotherhame—he had no longer the right nor the wish to keep them. They had been dear, they still possessed an awful charm, as the relics of the dead. Was

his father dead to him—the father whom he had loved with passion, trusted, copied, admired, believed in? Worse, worse than dead, for he had never lived! He was mourning for something which had never been.

He finished his small preparations for the change which he felt vaguely was impending, sat down upon a box, and hid his wounded face in his hands. There comes a time when suffering stupifies. Intensity of anguish produces a merciful reaction, and leaves the brain sensationless as stone. Did there exist no mental anæsthetic? What mind could retain its balance under the crushing shocks of life? Ralph had reached this period of stunned insensibility, and being roused by no necessity for effort, he remained long where he had first sunk down, inert and motionless.

Meantime, in the darkened drawing-room—for they had refused to suffer the romantic owl's light to be killed by the glare of candles—Geraldine and Lettice were passing a peaceful hour together. Peaceful, even to Geraldine, with a cold, sad peace, for the clinging hold of the fair child who rested in her arms, and the quiet, whispered talk in the fading light, soothed her passionate pain to a chastened melancholy. She clasped the slight form her strong young arms supported so easily with a strange tight pressure. She knew, what she had not the heart to tell Lettice, that this evening would not im-

robably be the last of their companionship. They might meet again, indeed; she would behold and desire the friends she might not possess, as Eve the sweet forbidden fruit, but to cultivate or even maintain an appearance of intimacy with Lord Rotherhame's children would be, under her new circumstances, as terrible to her as it would be undesired by him. She loved them, and yet when once the spell of this visit was broken the sight of them would be more pain than pleasure. It would dangerously rekindle those mad, sweet longings which it was now shame even to recall.

So this quiet talk in the falling evening, while the great house was well nigh empty, the stars shining, and the air cooling to a divine freshness, was to Geraldine sad and sweet as the last hour of a beloved life. She looked round on the familiar room, kissed the golden head upon her breast, and thought how soon all would become a memory only. Lettice told her, in soft tones, about her mother, the story of her death, and the dark night of despair into which it had plunged her father. Geraldine would have found it hard to say whether these confidences most grieved or pleased her. But she suffered them to flow out unimpeded, and then the two girls told each other something of their thoughts of death, and conjectured together of the Unknown World beyond the grave.

The sudden opening of the drawing-room



door startled them from their dreamy talk, and the voice of the hall-porter inquired in accents of alarm—

“Anybody there?”

“Yes,” they both exclaimed together, and Lettice added—

“Here, in the window. Do you want me, Rogers?”

“If you please, my Lady, I’ve just been up to answer my Lord’s bell, and—and—I’m afraid he’s not quite well.”

Lettice’s form was shaken from head to foot with a sudden trembling. The man’s tone was alarming, and Geraldine turned cold.

“He couldn’t speak to me,” continued Rogers, in high excitement. “I’m afraid he’s broke a blood-vessel or something. Will you go up to him, and I’ll run for the doctor?”

Lettice ran forward, but was seized with a nervous shrinking.

“Oh, Geraldine!” she cried, “come with me!”

Geraldine half rose, and then sank back upon her chair. She dared not obey the impulse of her heart. Lettice, seeing her hesitate, fled like the wind. The porter closed the door, and Geraldine was left alone. With a wildly beating heart she paced up and down the great rich room. Her feet made no sound on the velvet carpet, and the silence and solitariness of her position soon became almost insupportable. The

street lamp threw yellow gleams across the tall, gilded mirrors on the walls, and in them she saw herself reflected, pale and wild, like a wandering ghost. The minutes seemed interminable; her fevered fancy prolonged them into hours. It was twenty minutes before a cheerful noise of knocking and ringing announced the return of the church party, but she had lived a lifetime in the interval.

For some time she dared not venture out lest she should hear news worse than this uncertainty, and when at last she crept forth, and stood restlessly looking over the balusters, the hall was empty, and no approaching footfall encouraged her to linger. She returned to the drawing-room, but the awful phases of suspense had begun to weary her, and she found her way upwards to the schoolroom. There Miss Oliver, her Sunday bonnet still on her head, and her silk mantle hanging over her arm, was imbibing a glass of sherry, into whose yellow depths her tears were fast descending. She uttered a faint scream when she beheld Geraldine, and set her glass down quickly.

"Oh, my dear Miss Egerton, how dreadful you do look!"

Geraldine started. She would on no account have suffered her face to tell tales, but, absorbed in thoughts of another, she had forgotten herself.

"Rogers startled us so just now; Lettice

and I were both frightened," she answered in feeble apology. "Have you seen Lord Rotherhame, Miss Oliver?"

"Seen him? Oh, my love, no! It would never do to be running in and out of the room. This is indeed an awful shock to us, coming, too, as it does, immediately after the beautiful sermon we have been hearing on the future state."

"The future state!" Geraldine felt as if she should have fallen. "Do you mean that he is going to die?" she asked hoarsely.

"Heaven forbid! Indeed, I am thankful to say that Dr. Duff, who is with the poor dear man at this moment, gives an encouraging and hopeful diagnosis. He says that he has ruptured a blood-vessel, but that it is a very small one, and though he must for the present be kept absolutely quiet, yet there is really no ground for serious uneasiness. He is on his back now with ice on his forehead."

Geraldine's heart rebounded as though eased from a mountain load, but she expressed no gladness. Deep joy, like deep sorrow, keeps its own counsel.

"What could have brought it on?" she asked.

"That's what no one knows. Dr. Duff says it looks as if there had been some great mental shock, but I don't know how that could be. Most probably the long ride

fatigued him beyond his strength, and then the gentlemen have so many fusses and worries that we know nothing of. Politics may have gone wrong, or Berkeley have been worrying again. And then this is his wedding-day, and he is sure to have been thinking of poor dear Lady Rotherhame. I only wish he had stayed quietly at home," she continued fretfully. "I always did dislike anything of a pic-nic on Sunday, and I cannot think how people can disregard such plain warnings as that fearful accident on the Great Western on Easter Day for instance."

In the reaction from the tension of the last half-hour Geraldine burst out laughing. She sat some while longer listening to the soothing prattle of the good-natured old lady, and then, worn out, went wearily to bed.

## CHAPTER XXII.

I love thee so that, mangre all thy pride,  
Nor wit, nor reason, can my passion hide.

SHAKESPEARE.

THE Nutting family in possession of the Wimpole Street house had been having a snug time of it. From morn till eve each day had been one long succession of enjoyments. There were the quiet mornings when the children did their lessons, and the sisters sat by, listening, working, and doing their little mendings, Miss Henrietta occasionally lifting up her voice to resuscitate some half-forgotten French phrase in honour of the studies that Nina was superintending. Josephine at times trotted through the folding-doors into the front drawing-room, where she timidly stumbled through well-known airs on the grand piano, elaborated crochet designs which required solitude and concentration of intellect, or perused in a whirl of excitement the volumes by Miss Yonge and Miss Sewell, through which Nina sought to indoctrinate her mind with sound Church principles. Then there was the hearty luncheon, over which they lingered fondly till the sight of the brougham driving up to the door would pleasantly surprise them into action. It would have been gross ingratitude

to their absent host and hostess to inflict more than two minutes' waiting on their coachman and horses, and accordingly a frantic bustle would ensue, in the course of which Miss Henny, goaded and hurried on all sides, would narrowly escape an attack of hysterics. Then came the drive which elevated the poverty-stricken family straightway to Olympus ; a drive behind two horses, with the consciousness that Nina's pocket contained a purse whose contents would amply suffice to purchase entrance *en masse* to any and every entertainment that London afforded. Most popular of all with them, perhaps, was the world-famed waxwork of Madame Tussaud, where Joey gazed with solemn awe on long rows of respectable black-coated murderers drawn up in sober files within the Chamber of Horrors, and Miss Henny persistently trod upon the well-worn toes of the ill-fated waxen Quaker, on each successive occasion craving pardon in accents of increasing contrition and humility. What joy, too, to return at evening with renewed appetites to a sumptuous supper-tea ! What ever-fresh exclamations of wonder and delight its profusion and varieties called forth ! The servants in Wimpole Street, gratified by the appreciation lavishly accorded to their hospitable exertions, vied with one another in suggesting fresh delicacies. A household easily catches the infection of a liberal spirit in its heads, and

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Archdeacon Egerton's domestics were not discouraged in their benevolent schemes by the consciousness that not they, but their master, would have the bills to pay.

Before the days of the Nutting visit had passed, an event occurred which relieved the feminine parliament from the heavy responsibility of deciding each day between rival expenses and amusements.

One morning, just as the dinner-bell had rung, the Reverend Herbert Meules made his appearance in the drawing-room. He had come to make good a promise given to the Archdeacon at Rotherhame that he would not fail, if he came to town, to look him up in Wimpole Street. Nina, overwhelmed with confusion and delight, blushing explained the absence of the heads of the house, pressed the good Curate to share their early dinner, and plied him with respectful attentions throughout the meal. In course of conversation it transpired that Nina had positively never made acquaintance with a bran new church in a North-West suburb, and on her expressing an ardent desire to undertake a pilgrimage thither, coupled with a faint hesitation as to the difficulty of finding her way, the Reverend Herbert could do no less than volunteer to be her guide, and that very afternoon escort the entire party to Kilburn. His offer was accepted with enthusiasm. A suspicion of heretical tendencies in this new built sanctuary added to

the interest of its inspection, in the eyes of Ann and Joey, the dangerous charm that belongs to stolen pleasures, and there was no "Muzza" at hand to hurl unanswerable texts of Scripture at their heads. The carriage came, a projected expedition to Battersea Park was joyfully abandoned, and the order given to drive to Park Road, Kilburn. It was a highly successful expedition, and not least did Mr. Meules recognise its agreeability. None were near to carp or criticise, none to share with him the homage of the ladies. The awe with which Miss Ann regarded the long-coated curate as the very incarnation of Popery gave him a pleasant sense of importance, and drove him closer to Nina, the sole representative of the faithful laity in this little company of female schismatics.

Before the party separated, Herbert had obtained permission to bring his sister Lucy with him next day to make acquaintance with the ladies. It was a novel pleasure to the Nuttings to be sought after, and Miss Meules, when she arrived in due time upon her brother's arm, was received with effusion. The interview resulted in the discovery that there remained a goodly number of "advanced" London churches to which Nina was as yet a stranger. Almost as a matter of course thenceforward Herbert and Lucy Meules arrived daily to take the Nuttings out, and their return was frequently



delayed to so late an hour that Nina felt herself compelled, in deference to Mrs Egerton's known hospitality, to invite them to remain and partake of supper-tea. Finally, one lovely day when they had gone by train to Chiselhurst, returning in the romantic cool of evening, matters had come to a climax. Ninnie re-entered the Wimpole Street house with streaming eyes, and forthwith—much to the mystification of the children, who concluded that something dreadful must have happened—retreated to her chamber, where she indited to her "precious Mrs. Egerton" a darkly significant missive, expressive of her intention, when she should return from Kent, to hide her face in her shoulder and breathe a happy secret into her ear.

From that day—it was Friday—to the Monday of the Archdeacon's anticipated return, the young Curate was seen no more in Wimpole Street. Herbert Meules was—as all the world, himself not excepted, recognised—no common man. His every action was governed by the severe rule of lofty principle, and he at once made up his mind that propriety would require him to abstain from appearing in his new character at No. 21 until it had received the sanction of the mistress of the house. Harriet and George, taking his absence into consideration, decided in conclave that "perhaps grown-up people fought each other sometimes in secret, and

that Miss Nutting and Mr. Meules must have quarrelled that evening when they were so long walking alone together in the woods at Chiselhurst."

Monday came, the day which must drive forth the Nuttings from earthly paradise and witness their return to household cares, economy, and Muzza. But vicarious petitions had been forwarded by post in Georgy's big round hand that "Miss Henny and the others might stay on to late tea, and return thanks in person for the prolonged hospitality of their kind entertainers."

Dinner was over, and the carriage came round as usual. The Nuttings had promised themselves the gratification of going in a body to bring "dear little Geraldine" home. Nurse mercifully took charge of the little ones, and bore them off to the German Fair, and the three sisters stepped with sad hearts into the brougham for their final expedition. Josephine's spirit failed her a little as she thought of her pedestrian future, but interesting thoughts came to divert her. For the first time in her life she had been the confidante of a love-affair, and her head was filled with airy castles.

"Will you get out, ma'am?" inquired the footman, appearing at the window as the carriage drew up.

"Ye-es—no-o! very nice, I'm sure, thank you, James," quavered Miss Henny, in an agony of indecision. "Very wrong of you

girls not to have considered before whether we ought to go in. What *are* we to do? Will some one speak?"

"I wonder what the Archdeacon's wishes would be," said Ninnie.

"I must say," observed Ann, with an appreciative smack of the lips, "that I should dearly like to see the inside of a lord's house for once."

"And if we went in, dear Geraldine would not feel herself so hurried," suggested tiny Josephine, who secretly participated in Ann's curiosity.

This decided the knotty point. The carriage disgorged its occupants, and the Nutting family followed the footman timorously as, with the ease of long familiarity, he led the way up the great front staircase.

"A worldly establishment," whispered Joey, who was toddling on behind the rest. "I see he wears powder."

"I wonder if we shall be shown into the saloon," returned Ann, "and whether we shall see the Earl of Rotherhame. What should you think, Ninnie?"

"I am sure I don't know, de-ar! But Anny—if we should—you will remember that he is, I believe, rather High—the domestic chaplain is so certainly—and you won't be speaking too freely on doctrine, will you, love?"

"If I am to speak on doctrine at all, I shall certainly declare the whole Gospel,"

returned Ann boldly ; but, noticing the troubled expression on Nina's face, she made haste to add : " However, 't isn't likely he'll consult me. The Church always did look down on chapel-goers ! "

" Dear ! what a handsome room you've got," observed Miss Henny politely to the footman, as he opened the drawing-room door. " Nothing could be more tasty, I'm sure. Gurls, have you wiped your feet properly ? Don't, pray, be bringing mud on to this beau-tiful carpet."

" Well, I fully thought I had," responded Ann, " but it don't seem so, to look at that clod," and she glanced remorsefully at a lump of dried mud which had just fallen from her boot.

" Oh, Ann, Ann, what would the young man say if he saw it ? " lamented her sister reproachfully, and looking over her shoulder to see if the footman had departed.

Then, stooping down, she picked up the clod, and, after vainly scanning the room for a suitable receptacle, glided it with praiseworthy self-sacrifice into her petticoat pocket.

" This is comfort ! " exclaimed Ann, plumping herself down into an easy chair, and looking up into the painted ceiling. " This upholstery must have cost a mint of money. What are you wandering up and down for, Baby ? Can't you sit quiet ? "

" I am looking for patterns," murmured

Josephine, who, like a butterfly among opening flowers, was hovering round each anti-macassar in succession. "This one is a love! but it has too lacy a look for me. How few there are! In an establishment of this style I should have expected to find dozens."

"Didn't you think, love, there must have been death in the house when we first arrived?" said Miss Henny, turning her watering eyes on Nina. "So many blinds were drawn down; it turned me quite fainty for a minute, for I couldn't help thinking to myself, 'What if dear Geraldine had been taken suddenly, and we had to go home and break it to her papa and mamma!'"

"Don't be worrying your head with nonsense," returned Ann sharply. "'Tisn't a bit of good to be meeting troubles half way."

The day in St. Jerome's House had slipped away much as other days before it had done. The quiet luncheon was just over, and Geraldine, drifting on in the old accustomed course, had sat down to play duets with Lettice, when the servant came to tell her that the carriage had arrived to take her home. The announcement, although expected, came like a blow, and with a keen pang the thought pierced her that the end had come, and that all that now remained to her was to say "Good-bye."

Hurrying upstairs, not to allow herself space for thought, she dressed quickly. The sheets were taken from the bed, all her

knick-knacks had disappeared, her boxes had gone downstairs ; already the dear familiar room seemed to know her no more. She lingered one moment by the window to take a last look at the garden, and the view she had so often enjoyed at eventide of the gilded towers of St. Stephen's, bathed in the cheerful light of the descending sun. But as she gazed her eye was caught by the iron steps that descended from the balcony, and the scent of climbing roses struck her with a sharp and sudden pain. She turned hastily away, leaving Dawson to follow her ; she would never bear that sweet scent of roses any more.

She was turning the corner to the school-room when a door opened suddenly, and she stood face to face with Lord Rotherhame. He had been ordered by his doctor to keep all day on his back in the quiet of his room, and she had expected confidently that she would be spared the ordeal of meeting him again. Could she have turned her back and escaped unnoticed she would have done so gladly, but he was so close to her that she could have touched him, and they looked one another full in the face. Geraldine stood speechless. He seemed to her to have put on middle-age. Lord Rotherhame was the first to recover himself. He smiled—a forced, mechanical smile—and murmured something, she scarcely knew what, about her going away.

"The carriage has come for me," she answered cheerfully, repressing with all her strength the ominous quiver in her voice. "I must thank you for having taken compassion on me in my parents' absence, and for my pleasant visit. Are you feeling better this morning?"

"Much better, thank you! I shall be all right again in a couple of days." He paused, as if speaking was a matter of difficulty. "Lettice and the little ones will miss you much."

Geraldine held out her hand and parted her lips to say good-bye, but she found it impossible to master her voice, and, before she could even turn her head, her eyes were flooded with a rush of scalding tears. Lord Rotherhame saw, and a look of inexpressible anguish darkened his face.

"Good-bye!" he said, with grave brevity, and dropping her hand as if it stung him, he turned abruptly away.

Geraldine hurried off in a contrary direction.

The afternoon clouded over as she lingered in the schoolroom, and before she had driven away, half smothered by parting kisses, and bewildered by the innumerable thanksgivings for their happy visit which the Nuttings buzzed into her ears, a sudden heavy shower began to fall. She looked enviously through the carriage-window at the clouds. They were free to weep their hearts dry, while she

must pay in bitter shame for those few drops which pent-up agony had wrung from her. But with all great love humility is mingled, and she could better bear to have revealed her weakness to *him* than to let any suspicion germinate in the minds of her parents or sister. She was thankful to reach home before them, for she knew well that till nature had had its way, and she had sobbed out her wretchedness in solitude, she could not count on meeting them with the self-command which was necessary to the preservation of her secret. Shame could not but mingle its bitter flavour in her cup of desolation, and she desired more and more feverishly to hide from all but him to whom she had involuntarily revealed it, the sad secret that she had laid her heart—her supreme, richest, and most sacred treasure—at the feet of one who had counted it as dross.

Ralph, white and nerveless from excess of mental suffering, was lying on the library sofa, when he heard the wheels of the Egertons' carriage roll from the door. Little Edward was with him, and had settled himself on the hearthrug for a game of play. Ralph started up as the door slammed to, and looked eagerly out of the window.

"Eddy," he cried out, "whose carriage is that? Is Miss Egerton gone away?"

"Yes, Ralph, I think so, because just now when I ran into the drawing-room I found a



number of nice ladies there, and they all kissed me, and asked if I was the Honourable Edward, and I said I didn't know. But then Geraldine came in and kissed me too, and said, 'Good-bye, my darling boy.'"

Ralph dropped his head wearily back upon the cushions.

"Thank Heaven she is gone!" he murmured.

Edward caught the words.

"Why are you glad poor Geraldine is gone?" he asked reproachfully. "I am very sorry, she is so kind and pretty. Since she came we have been much gladder. I should like her to stay always."

"Don't say that, Eddy!" said Ralph, with an unconscious contraction of the brows.

"Berkeley," said Edward, rising and drawing near, with a long wistful gaze into his brother's face, "how did that ugly mark come that you've got upon your cheek?"

Berkeley flushed, and instinctively plunged deeper into his cushions.

"O, it's nothing," he answered with nervous haste, and then changing the subject, abruptly added: "You seem very grieved to lose Miss Egerton. I used to play better games with you than she does; but I've been dull and stupid lately, and I expect you've forgotten all about the fun we used to have. I wonder if you would feel a bit sorry, little chap, if I were to go away for a long, long

time, and perhaps never come back any more at all?"

"I wouldn't let you," responded Edward sturdily, and putting his two little arms round his brother's neck as he spoke. "But *won't* you tell me, Berkeley, how you got that bad place? If it's a secret I won't ever tell anybody, and I'll put some of my tonic on it to make it better."

"My own little brother," exclaimed Berkeley, embracing him with passionate tenderness, "love me always, Edward, won't you, whatever other people may say against me?"

"Edward!" said a cold imperious voice which caused both boys to start, and Berkeley to shake, "come here, I want you."

Berkeley pulled the child's arms from his neck and pushed him from him.

"Go at once," he whispered, "don't keep him waiting."

The boy obeyed, and his father taking his hand, looked at him with unconscious sternness.

"What are you doing here?" he asked; "you should be in the nursery."

"My horse ran away, Fardie," responded Edward, his confidence not in the least abated by his father's unwonted manner, "so I came after him, and he was so tired, poor thing, that I told him a story and made him lie down."

The child's innocent confidence conquered his father.

"You are a kind boy," he said with a sudden change to tenderness; "but your horse will rest as well in my room as here, won't he? Bring him upstairs, and then I can hear the story too. You like to be with father, don't you, my darling?"

"Yes, you're the nicest in the world; I'll come," replied Edward with prompt decision.

"Won't you let me come too?" asked Ralph, close to them before his father had time to leave the room. "You *must* let me speak to you."

His voice sounded like a cry.

Lord Rotherhame gave him a look, a long look, that seemed to scathe as it rested on him

"Are you in your senses?" he asked at length. "Do you think I have forgotten yesterday?"

Ralph lifted his eyes, and they had in them the piteous appeal of a dog that would avert a blow from its master's hand. Then he shrank back in silence, heard his father and brother depart, and again buried his face in the pillows. Edward had dropped his toy at the door, and observing this, Lord Rotherhame turned back to pick it up for him. The library door had been left ajar, and through the opening he could see the curling auburn head he had once loved so well lying on the cushions, and the rounded contour of

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the oval boyish face. The time was coming when he would give the best years of his life could they avail even for one day to fill up the outline of those features sharpened by mortal sickness, and bring back the youthful dimples to the hollow cheek.

The rain dripped ceaselessly upon the window, the clock ticked loud, and the rumble of cabs and carriages echoed through the dreary room where Ralph remained alone.

His father's terrible look burned like fire into his brain; it had told him what he had already guessed—that for him there was no forgiveness, that his sin was judged too black even for penalty, and it seemed to have poisoned his soul by the barb of its winged hatred. That the old threat would now be fulfilled, and he sent forth from his home for ever, he had accepted as an inevitable certainty, and early that day he had risen from his bed and remained for hours in his room awaiting the order that should bid him go. But when the morning wore away and still no message came, he had wearied of his waiting attitude, and had crept down into the empty library. Now that the afternoon was waning to its close, it seemed possible to him that he would be allowed to sleep one more night at least beneath his father's roof. Suddenly, in the midst of his miserable apathy, a chill fear crept over him. Might it not be that it was his father's design to retain him in his own hands until he should

have executed his fatal threat, and burnt to ashes the murdered man's documents; an act which, while it set him free from the dangers of conviction, would tie as a millstone round his descendants' necks, the cursed inheritance which had been bought with blood? Was he wasting moments which could never after be recalled? the last in which it would be within the range of possibility to save himself, or his little brother—between whom and a terrible heirloom only his frail life intervened—from the infamy of robbing the defenceless, and his father from a fresh and deliberate crime? His father was ill, unable to move from home. Now or never was his chance! He must hasten instantly to the Castle, by fair means or foul force his way to the dungeons, and possess himself of the all-important papers. Silencing all scruples by the reflection that he was going to render his father a better service than any it had been in his power to do him, even in the days of their most close and tender friendship, he sprang up, feverishly eager for action. Then walking round the room with knitted brows he briefly considered his plans.

The night train from London left for St. Dunstan's at 7.15; but how should he pay his journey? His last sovereign had gone to purchase poor old Tray immunity from Robert Bogle's vengeance—he feared to awake suspicion by borrowing of the servants.

But he had one resource. There was Josceline, his faithful ally, who, at a word, would give him help and ask no questions. He would at once make his way to his friend's lodgings, and revealing nothing but the fact of his irrevocable breach with his father, borrow money from him to take him to Rotherhame. So far his path was clear, conscience forbade him to shrink from the prompt exertion which alone could procure success. And yet he lingered, battered in mind and body, oppressed by a miserable vacillation. Without, the dreary rain was falling, and a cold mist beginning to steal along the streets—within, the pleasant sound of chinking cups as the footman carried up the schoolroom tea fell comfortably upon his ear, and the glow of the small fire which, feeling shivering and ill, he had ventured to light, lured him to lie down once more and court forgetfulness in sleep. All the vigour and force of youth seemed to have oozed out from his veins, his blood flowed sluggishly, and benumbed by a creeping lassitude, he recoiled with loathing from the idea of going out alone, away from all he knew and loved, to struggle and suffer in the grey, dismal, unfriendly world.

The door opened softly and Parsons glided in. He carried a silver salver on which lay a small three-cornered note. Ralph took it, and with a secret throb of the heart, saw that it was directed to him in his father's

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hand. Parsons, withdrawing to a respectful distance, stood watching him as he opened and perused it with an attentive eye that never wandered from his face. He read—

“I am making arrangements with a gentleman to go with you to Germany as your travelling tutor. Two days at least must elapse before he will be ready to start; in the meantime, to save me from the chance of seeing you, my orders are that you confine yourself strictly to your own room. Parsons will pack your portmanteau, and wait upon you as long as you are in the house.—R. & B.”

An electric thrill passed through Ralph's veins, and in a moment his irresolution vanished. There was no room now to doubt his father's intention. Two or three days would give him ample time to get rid of the evidence of his fraud, and till that work was safely accomplished, Ralph would be kept close prisoner. Becoming suddenly conscious of Parsons' continued presence he at once made up his mind that his father must have forbidden him to let him out of his sight. The minute for action had come. Did he once go up to his room and suffer the valet to turn the key upon him the game was lost!—lost irretrievably! Maintaining his appearance of languid indifference he glanced up at the servant who was waiting near the door.

“There is no answer, Parsons,” he said, and slipped the note into his pocket.

Parsons bowed, and made a motion as if to go, but the next moment, uttering an inarticulate murmur, drew up again and looked enquiringly at his young master. Ralph threw himself back in an armchair, and raised his eyes with an expression of surprise.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked.

The valet gaped.

"Do you know the contents of his Lordship's letter?" inquired Berkeley, looking him full in the face.

Parson's good breeding was much shocked by the indelicacy of this question.

"I—I know a little—something of what 'tis, my Lord," he replied unwillingly.

"And I conclude you are either curious to see the effect produced, or else that you wish to recall the pleasant associations of those childish days when you were employed to walk me off to bed in disgrace. Really, I feel touched by the reminiscence!"

Parsons began to look severe.

"I was to carry information to his Lordship that you were in your room, Lord Berkeley," he said, "and I've nothing to do but to obey my orders."

"Nor I either, I suppose," returned Ralph, rising and nonchalantly putting his hands into his pockets. "I'm obliged for the considerate manner in which you have executed your painful duty. Isn't that the correct formula? Pick up that *Punch*, please, and those volumes of Macaulay, if it's not against



your orders to permit me to improve my mind."

Parsons obeyed, and followed him closely from the room. Ralph went whistling into the hall. The old porter was snoozing in his chair, and even the sound of the double-knock, which at that moment announced the arrival of visitors, did not rouse him from his slumbers.

"Wake up, you old sloth!" he said, with a pretence of hilarity, "or— Never mind, Parsons; let him be. I'll let the gentlefolks in for him. It seems to me that, like his mother Britannia, Rogers expects every man to do his duty."

"My Lord! my Lord!" exclaimed Parsons, shaking Rogers vigorously, "don't demean yourself so! Company at the door, Mr. Rogers."

And as the old man, rubbing his eyes, rose slowly from his seat, the distracted valet hurried after his young master, who was in the act of opening the street door, and murmured in his ear—

"I don't think his Lordship would be pleased to find you loitering about like this, my Lord."

"Confound you, Parsons! You're coming the jailor over me too strong! I'm not going to shut myself up in a close attic without taking a whiff of fresh air first."

And he flung the door wide open.

"Lord Rotherhame at home?" inquired a tall footman on the step.

"Enquire within; business communications to be addressed to the hall porter," returned Ralph coolly. "Hallo! Mrs. Dering. How nice!"

He descended the steps and approached the carriage as if to speak to her; then, while Parsons was for a moment engaged in courteous apologies to the affronted footman, he swerved aside, made a rush for the nearest corner, and in a moment was out of sight.

Ralph was a swift runner; he ran now as if for life, dodging from street to street, and ever and anon turning his head to see if he were followed. Houses and lamp-posts receded one after another as he sped onward; horses and foot-passengers gave way before him, and the busy crowds through which he threaded his way stared at him blankly, wondering who might be the strange, hatless boy that shot past them like an arrow. Policemen drew up with a suspicious gaze, but before they could find time to bid him stop, he was far away, darting among horses' heads or provoking outraged cabbies to utter expostulatory oaths. Meantime a great darkness came over the heavens, and ascending vapours blended with descending rain in one blinding haze. At last he reached the narrow bye-streets of Holborn, and was close to his destination. The look

of mocking merriment that his face had worn during his little interview with Parsons had completely died away, and there was a set purpose on his features, an eager, hunted glare in his eye as of a fox which fears that the hounds are on its track. Presently there rose before his eyes the well-known sight of the red and blue chemist's lamps which marked the place of Josceline's habitation. In a moment he was across the street and in the act of setting foot on the further pavement, when suddenly a hansom cab whirled round the corner; he was struck to the ground; a million sparkles danced before his eyes; then a mist absorbed them, and he knew no more.

When Ralph came to himself he was lying in the chemist's back-parlour, with bandaged head and swimming brain. The mild-faced apothecary was bending over him, and a small mob, collected inside the shop, were peering curiously at him through the closed glass doors. For a moment memory failed; he could form no idea of how he came there, or why every motion should be attended with racking agony. The pale face of Josceline, who, standing by his side, was fanning him with desperate energy, recalled him to himself, and gathering all his strength for one great effort, he turned his head and whispered—

“For God's sake, Josceline, keep my secret. Let no one know that I am here!”

## CHAPTER XXIII.

To dream of joy and wake to sorrow,  
Is doomed to all that love and live.

BYRON.

That thou art blamed shall not be thy defect,  
For slander's mark was ever yet the fair.

SHAKESPEARE.

"GERALDINE and Gertrude, dears," cooed the mild voice of Nina Nutting as, one sunny August morning, she hopped into the school-room where her two pupils were diligently writing exercises, "your dear mamma has kindly given me the bill of the meeting to put up against the wall; isn't it jolly? Oh naughty, naughty me; there's that word again! I wonder what place of honour we can find for it where it can be seen by every one."

"Behind the back of the piano, I suggest," replied Gertrude, glancing up from her blotted phrases with a yawn, "for I don't see the use of sticking up a notice to be read by no one but ourselves, who already know it by heart. Besides, we scarcely require to be reminded of the date, seeing that the meeting takes place this very afternoon."

"Of course not, you wicked pussy; but still it is pleasant, whenever we lift our eyes, to be reminded of the treat that's coming.

And I am so pleased, old girlie, too, that *you* are to have a little change to-day, and to hear the dear Bishop speak. It will cheer you up, I'm sure."

And frisking round to Geraldine, who, pale and languid, was poring over her grammar, Nina raised her chin and peered playfully into her face.

"Why should I be supposed to want cheering?" answered Geraldine, involuntarily resisting. "There's nothing the matter with me that I'm aware of."

"Well, I'm not so sure. I consider that you have been looking extremely solemn and so-so the last few days. Perhaps, if the truth were told, you have been feeling a wee bit disinclined to put your shoulder to the wheel again after your fortnight's holiday at St. Jerome's House. Come, confess."

"I ought to have got over that by this time," she answered, with a smile sadder than her gravity.

"I wonder whether we shall have a full meeting?" sighed Nina, anxiously. "What I principally hope is that the clergy will muster in good force."

"We all know one clergyman, at least, who will not fail," returned Geraldine, rousing herself to animation, and lifting her eyelids, which looked as if they had scarcely been closed for nights. "Answer me one question, Miss Nutting. Is it out of pure, disinterested zeal for the woolly-headed little

blacks that Mr. Meules has undertaken this dusty journey up to town ? ”

“ Oh, you bad, bad creature ! ” cried Nina, tittering and blushing with intensest rapture ; “ you deserve to be well kissed to punish you. ”

And suiting the action to the word, she enfolded her pupil in a prolonged embrace, to which Geraldine submitted philosophically.

There was an older look on the young girl's face, which her family vaguely noted. No tangible sign of age, no beginning of a wrinkle on her broad, fair brow, rather a hovering shade of gentleness—the chastened gentleness of one who has become acquainted with grief. She knew something of life now. It seemed to her that she had dived into its depths, and the influence of what she had there experienced lingered on her features, and infused into her soul a grave pity for those who in happy ignorance still lightly skimmed its laughing surface. She was quiet and kind, entering with a more thoughtful interest than formerly into the joys and sorrows of those around her. But it had not been without a sharp struggle that she had settled down into this mournful calm, and come to understand that for the unhappy the only resource is to live in the happiness of others. When she had first come home her nerves had been all on edge, and her silence and unnatural irritability had struck her parents painfully. Often in private they

speculated on the cause of the alteration in their child, and called in Gertrude to undergo minute examination. But Gertrude could give them little help. Even with her sister—the friend of her bosom—Geraldine had on this occasion maintained a close reserve. It had seemed to her that the one element wanting to make her misery quite intolerable would be its publication in the family circle; and unconscious how her looks betrayed her, she fondly imagined that by dint of occasional spasmodic bursts of merriment, she had succeeded in blinding her relations' eyes. Bereavement by death seemed to her, by the side of this insufferable flatness, this blank loss, almost like happiness. There is something to the survivor inexpressibly sublime in the knowledge that his loss is to the dead gain, ineffable support in the thought of the eternity of love, the soul union which physical separation can but render more strong and sacred. But from Geraldine's spirit joy had fled—not to a brighter sphere where every day growing fast it would wait to become her own again, when she should have left the world behind her—but into a grave where it would moulder into nothingness. A killing frost had verily entered into the garden of her soul, cut down its budding hopes, nipped its delights, and sucked out its sap of life. A sense of loss haunted her day and night, a consciousness of inward sinking and negation. Very dimly the notion began to take a kind

of floating shape within her that *something* might survive out of this wreck of hope—that though she could not be happy, she might still be good ; that life, however dark, if lived for others, is not lived in vain.

And so it came that in that great school, whose teacher is experience, whose master God, Geraldine was taken from the beginners' class and initiated into a higher standard of education. So much of the life and love of the house centered in its joyous elder daughter, that this change brought a deep shadow over her parents' hearts. Mrs. Egerton's motherly brain teemed with plans for restoring her to her former spirits, and Geraldine had daily to defend herself against proposals for change of air and visits from friends, which her mother fondly believed would rouse and cheer her.

While Ninnie and Geraldine were embracing, Gertrude was busying herself in fastening the large printed bill of the meeting, with its staring blue and yellow letters, with a hair-pin to the wall.

"There now, Miss Nutting," she exclaimed, as, stepping back, she contemplated her successful performance, "I think he who runs may read that."

"I will!" cried George stopping in the middle of an elaborate long-division sum, and dropping his fat arms upon the school-room table. And he read aloud in a sten-



torian voice, which drew from Miss Nutting a cry of remonstrance :

“ ‘ On Thursday, Aug. 15th, a Meeting of the supporters of the New Mission to Ketchi-ki-wu will (D.V.) be held in St. James’ Hall, the Rt. Hon. the Earl of Rotherhame and Berkeley in the chair. The Lord Bishop elect of Ketchi-ki-wu, and other clergymen and laymen, will address the meeting. Proceedings to commence at Three p.m.’ ”

As George read Geraldine turned and fixed her eyes upon the bill with a startled look. There was no doubt upon the point; as clearly as a printer could announce it, the Chairman of the Ketchi-ki-wu Mission Meeting was to be Lord Rotherhame.

“ Ketchi-ki-wu,” repeated George, labouriously spelling over each syllable of the mysterious word, “ what part of the world is that in, Miss Nutting? Is it a cape, or an island, or a piece of land almost surrounded by water, and not quite, or what ? ”

“ Ketchi-ki-wu,” returned Nina, removing her arms from Geraldine’s neck and resuming the preceptress. “ I’m glad to hear you wish for information, Georgy. Well, it’s in Africa, a long, long, way from our beloved British shores, although it is the property of our good Queen Victoria.”

“ Africa,” repeated George, solemnly, “ that is the place where lions and tigers

live, and where there are snakes and deserts, and Uncle Tom's Cabins, and where the dreadful people are black instead of white."

Miss Nutting admitted the general justice of this description, but proceeded to qualify it by some further remarks on the climate and productions, taken from "Cornwall's Geography."

"I am so glad we shall have the chance of another talk with Lord Rotherhame," said Gertrude. "Diney, had you any idea that he was going to preside?"

"No, on the contrary, I heard the Bishop of Ketchi-ki-wu trying to induce him to, for nearly half-an-hour one day, and he ended by refusing," answered Geraldine, a painful blush belying her assumed indifference. "I don't suppose you will be likely to see him to speak to, anyhow, unless you intend to go up upon the platform, and as for me, I have a headache, and I shall stay at home this afternoon."

Nina, horrified at her pupil's lack of missionary ardour was launching out into a storm of mingled remonstrance and incredulity, when the door opened, and the footman came in.


"If you please, young ladies," he said glancing towards Miss Nutting with a conscious grin, "my mistress begs you will all come down into the drawing-room. Dr. Bogle and Mr. Meules are here."

Ninnie clasped her hands, and made a rapturous little spring, and then cried out in an access of devotion to duty :

“ Oh, but the lessons, girls ; remember it’s not our time yet, and we shall get nothing done this afternoon.”

“ The Fifth Commandment before lessons ! ” returned Gertrude, sweeping her books off the table into a neighbouring chair. “ Come, Miss Nutting, I’ll race you ! ”

Nina smiled graciously, laid her scruples to rest, skipped downstairs with her pupils, and coyly pushing them on before her crept into the drawing-room. Dr. Bogle and the Arch-deacon were talking together in low tones by the window, and their very backs looked cross. Miss Bartholomew sat erect and gaunt, mounting guard over the downcast Ellen. Mrs. Egerton on the sofa was receiving the ingenuous confidences of the interesting Mr. Meules. He, poor, young man, notwithstanding the brightness of his matrimonial prospects, was by no means enjoying undimmed bliss. By flying in the face of his long-cherished doctrine of priestly celibacy, he had somewhat lost caste in his own eyes, and had not a little fallen, as he was made to feel, in the estimations of his Rector and of his old disciple, Miss Bartholomew. The sweet incense of her approval greeted his nostrils no longer, and his journey that morning, made in company with the Rector’s family—whose purpose it was to combine an



appearance at the meeting, which "the Earl" patronized, with the showing of the sickly Ellen to a London physician—had been to him a time of penance. It was comforting to reflect, while he was being tortured by allusions to Père Hyacinthe and Catherine Bora, that Dr. Bogle at least, as the father of a large and flourishing family, had small right to cast stones at him, and as for Miss Bartholomew, had he asked her instead of Ninnie Nutting to be his life's companion, he flattered himself, her scruples would not have proved insuperable.

To exchange the cold sufferance of his travelling companions for the warmth of Mrs. Egerton's genial greeting, to receive her motherly advice on the subject of his future housekeeping, was delightful—more delightful still to behold his Ninnie stealing in with blushing face wreathed in adoring and reverential smiles.

"How terribly thin you are looking, dear one," she whispered, as in obedience to Mrs. Egerton's significant signals she took possession of her vacated seat upon the sofa. "Oh Herbert! have a care, have a care! how easily you might glide into a decline!" She looked up as if aware that she was offering a congenial compliment. Consumption is to some minds a romantic malady, the only road to heaven worthy of the feet of priests and choristers; less sublimated mortals may make their exit from the world by the way of

stomach complaints and liver affections when and where they please.

"A decline! what should make my pet think of that?" he answered with a conscious smile. "A man who must be up before sunrise and out in all weathers, and who can never claim an unbroken night's rest, has no time to trouble himself with fanciful fears as to health."

"So many have said that before you, Herbie, and have gone on working, fasting, and toiling, till their health has broken down, and their precious services have been lost to the Church irrevocably. Don't think me dreadfully naughty, Herbie. You won't over do it, will you love?"

"Nina," returned Herbert, in tones of mild but marked reproof, "from you less than from any other can I suffer interference on the point of my spiritual duties. Do not dream that because as a man I love you, and rejoice to gratify even your passing whims, I can forget that in my office I am unapproachable. I do not wish to hurt my Ninnie's feelings, but she would not have me otherwise than rigidly—severely—frank, would she?"

Nina's crimson cheek pleaded eloquently for pardon. She fully appreciated the official side of her betrothed's character, and was gratefully conscious of the honour he had done her in choosing her, out of all the faithful laity, to share his heart and home.

Miss Bartholomew had meantime been observing this by-play with a stony glare, and when Nina, roused by a playful touch from Herbert, had raised her drooping lids, she perceived that her former rival had drawn near, and was stiffly extending towards her a long, lean arm.

"How do you do, Miss Nutting," said Miss Bartholomew, in her most sepulchral tone. "I hope you have not quite forgotten me."

"Oh, no, indeed!" returned Ninnie, extending her little, white hand with a beaming smile, "I think, dear Miss Bartholomew, I am hardly likely to forget my Christmas at Rotherhame, nor you either, old fellow!" and in her artless triumph she bestowed on the wan cheek of the young priest a coquettish tap, whose familiarity turned her rival's blood to gall.

"I believe it was Miss Bartholomew who first made us acquainted with each other," returned Herbert, who, sad to say, yet retained a spice of natural vindictiveness. "She has ever been to me an affectionate and constant helper, and I hope my Nina will find in her the trusted, useful, friend of her married life."

"Oh, if she only will," rejoined Nina sweetly. "It is pleasant to think I shall be settled so near you, dear Miss Bartholomew; your acquaintance with Herbie having been of so much longer standing than my own, you must know almost more of his ways,

than I can, and I shall look to you to give me many little hints," here she again stretched out her hand with winning frankness, but Miss Bartholomew withdrew somewhat sourly from her touch.

"My own avocations are so numerous, Miss Nutting, the Rector's calls upon my leisure so imperative, and the work of compiling heavy matter for such publications as the *Earnest Churchwoman*, so severe, that it will really be a welcome relief to me to be able to leave some portion of my lighter labours in your hands."

"I shall be pleased to help you in any way, if a certain somebody does not prove too exacting," and Nina turning her head on one side looked up archly into the weak eyes of her future lord. "But not being half so *learned* as you are, I shall not do your work nearly so well. I always thought Herbie would have chosen some one so very solid and superior, didn't you? What he could have found in poor little me to attract him, I'm sure, I can't imagine!"

The old proverb "there is no accounting for tastes," hovered on Miss Bartholomew's lips, and made them look a little prim, but she repressed the uncivil impulse, and merely observing—

"Not being aware that Mr. Meules contemplated matrimony, I had not formed an opinion on the point," she passed on with a sweep that imparted quite a majestic air to

her rusty, narrow skirt, and left the lovers to bill and coo in undisturbed content.

Geraldine, who had been carrying on a slightly labourious colloquy with Ellen Bogle, had meanwhile become disagreeably conscious that the Doctor in the intervals of his private talk with her father, was throwing on her, from time to time, various fierce and meaning glares, which, when she recalled her insulting rejection of his Robert's suit, half amused and half alarmed her. Several times she averted her eyes, till at last the glares culminated in a scowl. She looked up and faced it with an expression of calm surprise.

"Well my dear," began the Doctor in his most knock-me-down tone, on receiving this silent challenge, "you are grown quite a woman since you were with us at Christmas. How old are you, eh?"

"Nearly eighteen," she answered shortly.

"Oh, indeed! eighteen are you? Well, I suppose your lessons will soon be done with. But remember this, education don't end with lessons. The solid improvement of the mind is a work which should continue all through life. The blessed Saint Paul says of those poor butterflies that flit idly from one vanity to the other 'that the woman who liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth.'"

"Very true," chimed in the Archdeacon in tones of marked severity. "No life is more contemptible than the life of those who exist



only for the world and the admiration they can obtain."


"I hope," continued the Doctor, "that it may be my lot to see our young friend here growing up like the Geraldine I and my girls have been reading about of an evening, a holy-minded woman, who at an early age renounced the vanities of fashion, and in humble subjection to the will of her superiors, led a sober and useful life, working for the Church in the teeming parish of Spitalfields."

"Indeed," said the Archdeacon, "I should very much like to hear about her. We will get that book at once, it will do admirably for our evening readings."

"It was the work of her devoted mother," said the Doctor, "and she points out how conspicuous in her departed daughter were those graces—so sadly rare in these days—of humility and maidenly *modesty*. What more painful or shocking sight than an *immodest woman*?"

Geraldine coloured at his words, she scarce knew why, and Dr. Bogle, changing his tone, looked up at the Archdeacon.

"I suppose you have heard, Egerton," he said, "that in all probability my friend Rotherhame will not, after all, be at the meeting. He has received a sudden call of business, and fears he will not be able to manage both. I had such a characteristic note from him this morning, and slipped it



into my pocket, thinking you might like it for your autograph collection," and with some parade he drew forth a folded paper from his coat-tails. "If he don't turn up, Maclochlan the noted African explorer will take the chair."

"I am delighted to hear it," rejoined the Archdeacon, emphatically, and looking round to see whether he could discover a shade of disappointment in his daughter's face. "I should like, of all things, to hear Maclochlan; it will be a great treat, won't it girls?"

"Oh, no, papa!" cried Gertrude, blissfully unconscious of the trap laid by her suspicious parent; "what! that tiresome man who wrote 'Wanderings in the Desert,' and was thrice eaten by cannibals, and once by a lion. It is dreadfully provoking to have him instead of Lord Rotherhame."

"'Wanderings in the Desert' was a most profitable and interesting book," returned her father, with unwonted acerbity, "you had better keep your opinions to yourself, Gertrude, if they are so foolish."

The Archdeacon's asperity took both his daughters by surprise, but Geraldine had no suspicion that his displeasure was produced by the Doctor's poisonous mis-representations of her conduct. He had been giving *Robert's* version of what had passed in St. Jerome's House, and the Archdeacon had been told that everyone in the family, from Berkeley and Miss Oliver to the servants downward,

had noticed the bold and forward manner in which Geraldine had pursued her host, despite his ill-concealed annoyance at the persecution to which she subjected him. Among other scandals, the story of her going out after midnight to meet him in the garden had been dwelt upon with spiteful eloquence, and he had not omitted to record Lord Rotherhame's pointed coldness the last morning at breakfast—news of which had filtered through Lettice to Miss Oliver, and thence to Robert, already the sharer of the old lady's fears respecting the young guest's growing intimacy with her host. It was, of course, only the deep interest he felt in the Archdeacon, and all connected with him, and his strong sense of the responsibilities of friendship, which made the Doctor, as he assured Dr. Egerton, feel justified in speaking with so much candour, but, after mature deliberation, he had made up his mind that it was no more than his plain duty to acquaint her father with the manner in which Geraldine conducted herself when left to follow her own devices, and the kind of remarks to which, unhappily, she had laid herself open. The Archdeacon was beyond expression distressed by what he heard, and he made no effort to hide his displeasure.

"And are you looking forward to the meeting, Geraldine?" inquired the Doctor, emulating the cunning of his friend.

"No," she replied, fearing that to change

her plans and attend the meeting now she was relieved from the fear of encountering Lord Rotherhame would awake suspicion in Gertrude and Miss Nutting. "I am tired to-day and intend to stay indoors."

This announcement produced a heavy frown from her father, and an unpleasant smile from Dr. Bogle, but no remark was made, for Mrs. Egerton coming forward, sympathetically declared that she had thought dear little Diney was looking head-achy, and advised her to lie down and have a good long sleep till tea-time.

Luncheon was over. The bulk of the party had gone upstairs to get ready for their walk, and Geraldine lingered in the drawing-room window, listening abstractedly to the vocal rendering of Messrs. Moody and Sankey's hymns, by which two blind men in the street were hinting their desire for half-pence. A touch on the shoulder aroused her, and, looking round, she saw her father.

"Geraldine," he said severely, "I was much pained just now by the manner in which you openly threw over the idea of going to the meeting the moment you heard Lord Rotherhame would not be there."

"Papa!" she exclaimed, and flushed a vivid scarlet.

"Yes!" he returned, "no one present could have failed to see that that was your true reason for wishing to remain at home; Dr. Bogle noticed it, and I am certain that

others must have done so also ; I have been told—no matter by whom—that the same sort of thing has occasioned a great deal of comment before ; I hoped that you would have had more self-respect than to make such an exhibition of yourself."

Geraldine felt as if she must sink into the earth.

"I can guess," she answered, repressing a choking impulse to sob, "who it is that has said these unkind and untrue things of me, but I hardly expected you to—to"—and, unable to conclude, she turned away to hide the tears which were rushing into her eyes.

The Archdeacon was plainly very angry, so angry that her tears, before which his displeasure generally melted as snow before rain, only extracted from him a dubious grunt.

"Stay where you are now," he said. "I don't wish anyone to come with us who does not take an interest in the sacred object for which we are meeting together."

Geraldine was glad when they were all gone, when she heard the street door bang, and could lie and weep in her room without the risk of sympathising visits. Many a night, when she first came back from St. Jerome's House, she had cried herself to sleep, but of late, since this dreary peace had crept over her, her tears had been dried, and she had been able to maintain in the family-circle a composure which might almost have

been mistaken for cheerfulness. Now her trial seemed to have taken a new phase, and to have put forth a fresh and sharper sting. The worst had come to pass. Her secret was not only guessed at by the family—it was known to Dr. Bogle, had been trumpeted forth by him with all the cruel distinctness of a vulgar nature. Horrible misgivings that there might be some possible element of truth in the charge which her father's words implied, new fears, lest, in some unsuspected way, she might indeed have transgressed the fine boundary line of maidenly dignity, began to mingle with her first passionate sense of injustice. She sobbed wildly in the silence of her chamber, sobbed till she could sob no longer, and then sank gradually into a feverish sleep.

She woke up calm, but exhausted in mind and body. The sun was beginning to veer round to the west, and his strong light fell fiercely across vomiting chimneys and smoky backs of houses into her little chamber. She got up, bathed her face, and crept downstairs to the drawing-room. It was a relief to know that it was empty, and, pulling an easy chair to the open window, she sat down and let the faint, warm air blow in upon her aching brow. There was something soothing in the drowsy hush, in the summer intensity of the sky's blue, in the hum of wheels and voices from the surrounding streets, in the stillness of the room, no

children's voices or bustling feet breaking its monotonous quiet. She closed her eyes, and tried to rest herself by mentally scaling those azure heights, by entering in thought into the Heaven that lay beyond them. And, in the act, waking faded once more into sleep, and she seemed to be wandering in truth among the mystic arches of the Great Creator's Temple, the Seraph-hymn ascending round her, and the dim incense rising in perpetual adoration. She trod those Courts whose floor is as burnished gold; she saw herself standing, a battered, lonely, shivering girl, among the bright and solemn Angels. Above her towered the eternal pillars, vast and high, and near her hung a veil transfused with glory, before which winged creatures fell upon their faces. She saw how their wings caught the light, and she felt ashamed to think how discoloured her tear-stained face must look beneath the brilliancy of that unbearable splendour. She tried to shrink away and hide herself in the long, cool cloisters which stretched on either hand, but even there she saw the Angels pacing, and dared not go in to face the serene innocence of their awful eyes. Then her head began to swim with sudden dread, and she was on the point of falling, when a Face, human like her own, worn, and tear-stained, caught her glance, and gave her a throb of courage. A Man, so furrowed and grey that he looked old, leaned against one of the bright pillars,

and a bloody scourge was lying at His feet. A delicious sense of kindred and sympathy filled her—here was One who had lived, like herself, on the hard, dark earth, and who would not stare bewildered at the sorrow on her face. She sprang towards him—then, with a thrill, such as she had never before experienced, she saw that His hands bore the mark of nails.

Geraldine awoke, but for some minutes the scene around her, the prosaic London drawing-room, the noisy streets, the blackened balcony, seemed unrealities. A solemn awe was on her, and she felt that the Lord God had indeed spoken to her in a dream as in the old times he had been wont to speak with David His servant.



## CHAPTER XXIV.

Turning the whole wide world to May.

KEBLE.

Oft expectation fails, and most oft there  
Where most it promises, and oft it hits  
Where hope is coldest and despair most fits.

SHAKESPEARE.

AN hour passed. The first vivid impression of her dream began to fade, leaving in its stead a vague sense of comfort. The footman brought in tea, and Geraldine sipped it thoughtfully. The long quiet was doing her good, and when she heard a double-knock at the street door she remembered gladly that Gertrude had given orders against the admission of callers. But a moment later the door opened, she caught the sound of voices, and fancied she heard someone come into the hall. The door re-closed—and—yes, surely—John was coming upstairs. Was he merely bringing the cards for her inspection, or could it be that he had, in defiance of instructions, treacherously betrayed her to visitors. She sprang up, nervously pushing back her rough, bright hair, and dragging her handkerchief with murderous force across her eyes.

The steps drew near, the door was flung open, and John, hurrying in, said apologetically—

"The gentleman would come in, Miss ; he said he knew you was here, and wished to see you particular on business."


Geraldine made no answer. Her eyes were fixed on the figure advancing up the stairs, the figure of Lord Rotherhame.

He came in grave and cold, his pale, proud face seeming an anomaly in the genial brightness of that summer day. Geraldine's heart had given one wild bound which set all her veins throbbing. But the next moment a sick dread took possession of her. What was his business with her? Had he come to justify himself in her eyes! pricked by some pang of conscience to explain that he had found it necessary for her sake to change his friendly tone, to utter apologies for having, by inadvertence and want of caution, disturbed her peace? How would her pride endure this cruel ordeal? She drew herself up to her full height, and looked at him with stern set lips and angrily flashing eyes.

"Forgive my forcing myself upon you," said Lord Rotherhame, hastily, holding out his hand. "I was very anxious to see you."

She took his hand, but dropped it quickly.

"I am afraid you have chosen an unfortunate hour for your visit," she answered. "My people are all out at a meeting, and I stayed at home for—for quiet—or you would not even have found me."



"I know ; I saw your father at St. James' Hall, he told me I should find you if I came here."

Geraldine turned white. Her father was more angry with her than he had been for many years, and a terrible dread seized her as to what might have passed between him and Lord Rotherhame.

"You would like some tea?" she said hurriedly and drooping her head in irrepressible agitation. "I will ring for another cup, but I am sorry I cannot wait to give it you—I am obliged to go out immediately."

She felt Lord Rotherhame's great eyes upon her as she spoke, felt that he was reading her, and she writhed.

"You must not go!" he answered suddenly, but his tone was rather excited than peremptory, and his grave face grew eager. "For the sake of old friendship, even if you feel it no longer, sit down and listen patiently to what I have to say."

He drew her chair away from the window as he spoke, and she yielded, for there was something in his tone which she could not resist. She remained white and silent, with her two hands clasped upon her knees. He sat down close to her, and for a moment there was silence.

"I want first," he said at last, fixing his eyes upon her downcast face, "to tell you what has befallen me since you went away. Ralph has left me. He was once, as perhaps

you know, my idol, the one object for which I cared to live. He rewards me by seeking, no matter how, my ruin. He has caused me much misery, which has culminated in an unpardonable wrong. When he is in want I will relieve him, but I never mean to seek him out. I am glad he is gone," he went on with bitter intensity. "He is heartless and calculating. I am glad to wash my hands of him, to have done with him for ever!"

Geraldine began to breathe again. This was not what she had dreaded.

"And now," he went on, with a spasmodic motion, as though throwing off a weight, "I want to cast my past life behind me. All that once made it worth having has died, or—worse than died—has corrupted before my eyes. It has been too much my habit to harp on lost joys. My one desire now is to have done with fighting against Fate, and to forget!"

"Life fleets fast!" he continued with feverish rapidity, "fast—very fast!—I crave for a little happiness before I die. Music, beauty, poetry, genius, are all ready to allure and soothe. But the only true opiate for a heart that suffers is the love of a human soul. From dwelling in the tombs I turn with eager thirst to the intense life of sympathy. Can you, will you give it me? I have asked myself again and again whether it is not a crime to let my shadow darken your safe, sunlit path. I have

finally resolved to tell you all, and to leave the decision in your hands. I am about to ask of you a priceless boon."

He turned from her, and paced the room with restless steps. Accustomed—inured—to solitude, he acted almost as if alone; spoke as much to himself as to her. His agitation communicated itself to Geraldine, and trembling all over with the intensity of her emotion, she sat motionless, feeling speech to be impossible.

"I am not the man," he resumed half dreamily at last, "to make a young girl happy. The old song says, 'December should not wed with May,' and there are full twenty years between you and me. Middle-age has not mellowed me as it mellows many. Evil has an appalling power over me, and I hardly dare think what I have it in my nature to be and to do. Look at me!" As he spoke he stopped in front of her. "I have always been, with one exception, gentle to you, Geraldine. Can you fancy this face inflamed with that fierce passion which turns civilization into savagery, and changes man from the image of God to the likeness of the beasts? Could you tolerate the thought of me again, had you ever seen me as—God forgive me—I sometimes am?"

"My confession is not ended. I am not only at times the prey of insane—revengeful rage—I am inordinately proud, and at the same time mean. Mine is not

the lofty pride which scorns to stoop to a base action; it fears consequences, it prefers secret sin to open shame. I have sometimes talked to you as if I despised the world, and its opinion. It is false! I am its slave. I dread its contempt more than the frown of God. My life has been stained by some great sins. I do not mean the common sins of all men." . . . Here he suddenly broke off, and after a moment's silence began again:

"There is always a risk in marriage. The union of husband and wife is one so intense, close, ineffable, that you would in any case do well, before you enter into it, to pause and count the cost. And in this particular instance I have not dared ask you to be my wife without warning you against myself. Hitherto you have known only the bright side of me; in offering myself to you it was my duty to show you the dark. But do not let what I have said scare you too utterly. You can make me better if you will. I should be a devil if I were ever other than tender and true to you, and—I will do myself justice—if you will give yourself to me, I believe, I *know*, that I have the power to make you happy. What say you? Can you take the risk? Can you leave your safe, peaceful home and wander through the world with me?"

As his voice ceased Geraldine raised her downcast eyes, and lifted them to his face

literally shining with rapture. If his warning words had for one moment struck a chill to her heart, they were now scarcely remembered. Was it likely her faith in him could be shaken by self-accusation, however passionate?—self-accusation and self-scorn, which she believed were possible only to a noble nature, chafing at all that came short of ideal perfection. Her instinct was to love, to trust blindly, to adore, and against such certainty of the heart the most cautious reasoning contends in vain. To go hand in hand with him through life, and never till they reached the grave to say farewell! Heaven itself could scarce offer bliss more wondrous. So absorbed was she in the delirium of her rapture that she noticed nothing of the chill which crept across his face, as she lifted hers to his, the light of a first love dawning on it, and her whole soul come into her eyes.

“I hardly ever dreamed of such happiness as being loved by you,” she faltered. “I fear that you may weary of me. You will find out that I am not what you fancy me to be.”

“Wait!” he interposed. “Before our fate is irrevocably fixed, there remains yet something to be said. There is a love which can be felt for one only and once in a lifetime. I have loved and lost! I am bound to avow to you that till yesterday night I had resolved to consecrate all my re-

maining years to the adored memory of my wife. Gradually—though my love to her has never ceased to be the passion of my life—gradually, a gulf, wider than the grave at which we parted company, has yawned between us. She has gone her way to saints and angels; I have gone mine. So far has my path diverged from that we trod together, that her very outline has become indistinct—an intangible shadow, mocking my wild desire, and I have found myself abandoned to soul-destroying loneliness. Grief and brooding and vain longing have well nigh driven me mad, and I have had no hope to cling to, no hope of possessing her again when life is done. The only course that remains to me is to bury my dead in the depths of my heart, and trample on regrets!”

Geraldine pressed her hands together with a look of anguish and deep humiliation.

“I understand,” she said. “Feeling as you do, Lord Rotherhame, it could never have been for your own sake that you sought me here to-day. I am told by my father that those who were with me in your house have said of me that I showed plainly I cared for you. At first I would not believe it—it seemed too humiliating, too dreadful. I thought some enemy must have slandered me, but now that I find you also saw it, I am forced to admit they must have spoken truth. You have asked me to be your wife out of generous pity. Perhaps



you think that to confer such a happiness on me, will in some measure atone for what you tell me has been wrong in your past life. I thank you a thousand times, but I will not have your sacrifice. I am bitterly punished, it is true, for my miserable want of self-command, but the only kindness I want of you is to leave me now and say no more."

She rose as she spoke, and with head sunk low, moved towards the door. But Lord Rotherhame followed, and taking her hand, detained her by gentle force.

"You said you would hear me patiently to the end, and I will not let you go until you have fulfilled your promise. If you love me—which I dare to hope you may—give me the best, the only joy I can ever hope for. Without you to strengthen me to forget the past, and to create a happy future, my life must remain an aching void. I crave for your sympathy, for the sunshine of your sweet companionship. Geraldine, I know that to others what I say might seem unpardonable presumption, for you may well inspire the whole devotion of better men than I. But if it is possible that the most ardent admiration, the most tender affection, the most chivalrous reverence, the devotion of a life can content you—then, fair child, take them as your own, and let me love and protect you till I die!"

Her hesitation seemed to quicken his

eagerness, and there was 'an almost painful excitement in his eyes as he waited to see if she would turn away. But she did not. Her trembling hand still rested in his clasp, and, as soon as she could speak for tears, she looked up at him and said—

“If it is indeed so—if I may without selfishness—if I can do anything to make you more resigned and hopeful, I am content. To serve you is the greatest happiness I ask. Only be kind to me, and patient if I sometimes come short of your requirements.”

“God deal with me according as I am true and loving to you, and make me more worthy of you, sweet Geraldine!” he answered gravely.

And then a blessed darkness came over her, and feeling like a bird that has fluttered to its mother's wing, she found her head resting on his shoulder, and lay silently, her eyes closed, within his enfolding arms.

Then she felt his heart beat against her own—supreme moment, to have known which would have made it worth while to endure an eternity of sorrow—and it seemed to her that she was lifted above earth, and her soul, cradled in rest, lay flooded in a tide of ecstasy.

## CHAPTER XXV.

Silence is the perfectest herald of joy :  
I were but little happy, if I could say how much.

Filths savour but themselves.

SHAKESPEARE.

THERE was a noise of ringing and knocking at the street door, and voices were heard within the hall. Geraldine started up as if she had been shot, and, without waiting to give so much as one glance to her companion, ran upstairs and left him to confront her family alone.

She lay down on her bed, and a great rush of tears overflowed her eyes, tears so free and sweet that they seemed to wash out all memory of those bitter drops which but yesterday had been wrung up from her heart-depths. She did not try to realise the change which that hour had without warning brought into her life, and whose ripples she knew would flow on and mingle with the ocean of the great Life to come. But she luxuriated in it, as a lotus-eater might luxuriate among the sunshine and lilies of his sweet dream-isle, and blessed the God Who had made her a living soul and the parents who had given her birth. No hour in all the long glad future could, she thought, equal this hour, in which the dew of rapture lay

fresh on a heart which for a night had endured great heaviness.

After a while—she did not know whether long or short—a knock came at her door, and her father entered. She sat up and glanced timidly towards him. He came up to her, very grave and tender, and stooped to kiss her brow.

“Forgive me, my child,” he whispered.

Geraldine flung her arms round his neck, and pressed it tightly.

“Have you seen him?” she whispered at last.

“Before he came here; he was at the meeting after all, and he made me consent that he should come on and see you. He made everything clear to me. I shall not easily forgive myself for having believed a word against you, my darling.”

Geraldine cried a little more; she could not help it.

“He told us that you had said yes,” resumed her father, “but are you quite sure of your own heart? and do you feel positive that yours is not merely a girlish fancy, and that you can trust him as a wife should trust her husband?”

“Quite, quite sure. Oh, papa, I couldn’t give him up!”

“I like all I have seen of him, as you know; in fact, your mother and I both took to him at first sight. But he has faults, that any one can see, and I doubt whether he is

quite as clear in his religious convictions as one would wish."

"Nearly all men who think at all are troubled with some kind of doubts, papa, but any one so sweet and delightful as he is *must* be dear to God. He has been very unhappy, and it has embittered him. I feel as if God had put me in his way to be of use to him—at all events, I shall try."

"Shall we say a little prayer together?" asked the Archdeacon.


She felt glad that he should propose it, for her head was getting dizzy and bewildered, and it was a relief to rest her uncertain feet upon the firm ground of God's all-wise purpose, and to be reminded that about herself and the man she loved were wound the unseen Everlasting Arms.

"Go and see your mother and Gertrude," said her father presently, after he had bestowed upon her a few sentences of fatherly admonition, interspersed with kisses. "They are waiting in the schoolroom, for I stipulated for the first five minutes with you. I will go back to poor Lord Rotherhame, whom we deserted rather unceremoniously."

The Archdeacon had to preach a sermon that evening in an East End church, and accordingly a substantial supper-tea had been appointed for six o'clock. Three bells, however, were rung successively before the mistress of the house, followed by her daughters, entered the room where her husband

and guest awaited her. A little scene of joking, congratulations, and embraces ensued. Lord Rotherhame was unaccustomed to such domestic jubilations, and he watched them with an air of pensive pleasure, which, when Mrs. Egerton finished up by bestowing on his cheek a motherly salute, changed into one of rather embarrassed amazement.

Two pairs of betrothed lovers that evening graced the Archdeacon's board, and it was more of a surprise than a gratification to Lord Rotherhame to find himself presented as a brother bridegroom-elect to the Rotherhame Curate. Mr. Meules, who had been indulging in a stolen interview with his Nina in the drawing-room, received the congratulations of his Squire with a somewhat deprecatory smile, and piously observed that, having now found one upon whom he could lay the burden of his temporal cares, he hoped henceforth to be able to devote himself more exclusively to the higher duties of his calling. He was not sufficiently at his ease with Lord Rotherhame, whose character was a complete enigma to his limited professional understanding, to offer him any good wishes in return, but his Lordship was so genial and good-natured to the young couple as to awaken in the Reverend Herbert's breast pleasant visions of a possible future benefice, and to make Ninnie wonder self-chidingly that she had taken so little to him in times past.



Lord Rotherhame, at Mrs. Egerton's right hand, seemed to bask in the sunshine of her presence, and to catch something of her infectious geniality. The little children stared with profound interest at the new brother who was to be added to the home circle, and Nina and Herbie squeezed each other's hands beneath the cover of the table. Conversation did not flow very easily. They could none of them adapt themselves to the new position of affairs, and the occasion was almost oppressive in its greatness.

"Oh dear!" cried Mrs. Egerton suddenly, and her cheerful face wore an expression of blank dismay. "Did you hear that double-knock? I have only this moment remembered that Dr. Bogle at the meeting signified his intention of coming with his whole party to take a cup of tea with us. George, is that chicken quite cold?"

"Dr. Bogle!" exclaimed Lord Rotherhame, and Mr. Meules observed with shocked amazement that the expression he wore was not wholly of pleasure. "For pity's sake, ladies and gentlemen, keep our secret till I am gone."

"Rather late, Mrs. Egerton; I suppose you had given us up," cried the Doctor, entering the room before an assurance of silence could be given, and he was advancing to take her outstretched hand when his eye fell on Lord Rotherhame, and he stopped short, forgetting all about his hostess.

"Dear, dear, *you* here, my Lord ! This is *indeed* an unexpected treat ! Who would have thought of finding you at Egerton's ? I called at your house this morning for a chat, but Wentworth could not tell me where to find you. I have brought my poor Robert with me," he added in a whisper, "not knowing I should find you here. I trust indeed that his presence will not awaken painful associations. He is just taking off his coat and hat in the hall. You won't mind, will you ?"

Lord Rotherhame winced.

"Not in the least," he answered, with rather unnecessary fervour. "I should be sorry indeed to keep your son from his tea."

"That's just you all over, so truly kind," replied Dr. Bogle enthusiastically.

"Mrs. Egerton is speaking to you, I think," returned Lord Rotherhame, calmly withdrawing the hand the Doctor was pressing.

The Doctor now deigned to take notice of the lady of the house and the party generally, distinguishing Geraldine by a glance of special severity. Robert had come with him to Wimpole Street to show that he cared not a fig for Miss Egerton, nor for her rejection of his suit, and he was disagreeably surprised to find at the tea-table his quondam employer, from whom he had not parted on the most cordial terms. He returned Lord



Rotherhame's nod with a shambling obeisance, bestowed his sulkiest scowl on Geraldine, and proceeded to concentrate his whole attention on his plate.

Geraldine quickened her steps as she ascended the stairs when tea was over, for she had already been transfixed by the Doctor's hard, keen eye, and she suspected that he had it in his mind to sermonise her. But there was no escaping him. He pursued her determinately, and she literally shivered when she saw that he had found out her retreat behind the window curtains, and that, having drawn up a chair for himself, he was about to interpose his bulky person between her and the remainder of the party.

"Geraldine, my dear," he began, without preamble, "I am glad to have the chance of a private word with you. No doubt pa has mentioned to you something that I told him yesterday. I assure you it was not in any unkindness that I took that step, for I was as much pained as ever he could be by the sad tales I heard of you, and I felt it my duty, as a true friend, faithfully to warn both you and him."

"You are too good," replied Geraldine, with a scornful smile, which irritated him unspeakably.

"Remember I am not now alluding to your behaviour to my Robert, though that was reprehensible enough in all conscience, for you drew him on in such a way as might

have ruined his peace of mind had he really and truly cared about you."

"If I had," she interrupted fiercely, "it would have been no more than he deserved for his unkindness to Lord Berkeley."

"You evil-minded, mischief-making girl!" burst out the Doctor, beside himself at being thus attacked on his tenderest point—the "family." "Unkindness! Why Robert was always Berkeley's warmest friend till he so shamefully misconducted himself, and, as it happens, he was throughout acting in every particular under Lord Rotherhame's explicit directions. But don't try to turn away my thoughts to other people! I wish for once to make you see yourself as others see you. Believe me, Geraldine"—and he assumed the solemnity of a prophet—"that nothing is more to be shunned by a Christian young woman than any tendency to"—here he spoke *very* low—"to be bold or unmaidenly. Lord Rotherhame himself will not think any the more of you for your efforts to attract his attention, and"—

Geraldine's blue eyes flashed black.

"You are no gentleman, Dr. Bogle," she interrupted. "I'll not hear another word you have to say!"

"Geraldine! you are showing a shocking spirit of self-conceit," he replied, cowed for the moment, but quickly resuming his tone of lofty displeasure.

"Let me pass, do you hear?" she an-

swered passionately, and rising she forced her way past him, and walking straight up to Lord Rotherhame, dropped down on the sofa by his side.

The Doctor raised his hands and eyes in speechless horror that one so young should be so lost to all sense of decency.

"Well, what ails you, my pretty child?" asked Lord Rotherhame, smiling, as he noticed her flushed cheeks and evident perturbation.

"That Dr. Bogle's impertinence is past bearing!"

"Dr. Bogle impertinent, is he? You seem frequently to have a grievance of that nature. Dr. Bogle," he continued, in a louder tone, "what is it you have been doing to offend this young lady?"

The Doctor was absolutely thunderstruck to find that the girl had had the effrontery to carry her grievance to Lord Rotherhame himself.

"My dear Geraldine," he answered, with significant emphasis, "what I said to you was for your private ear alone, and in your own interest I would advise you to let it go no farther."

Geraldine smiled coldly, and turning away from him resumed her conversation with Lord Rotherhame, while the Doctor and Robert, interchanging glances, muttered between their teeth—

"Disgusting boldness!" and "Shameful little cad!"

"I must leave you now," said Lord Rotherhame, a few minutes later, "for I am bound to attend a Committee at the House by four. Do you think I may come and spend my next spare moments here?"

"Oh, of course, whenever you can," she answered, shyly. "Do you know I shall be really almost glad for you to go? I want a little quiet to realize all that has been happening. My brain is in such a whirl, I *cannot* grasp it."

"Poor little thing! I will leave you in peace without delay. Do lie down quietly in your own room, and try to sleep. It is my place now to look after you, and I hope you will take my prescriptions dutifully. And Geraldine," he continued, in a hesitating voice, "you agree to my compact. You will help me to forget, won't you?—to forget all miseries of the past, and to live in the happy present?"

She knew that he was thinking of Ralph, and shrank from giving the promise he demanded. But it was difficult to resist his imploring eyes, and the remembrance of her complete fiasco the only time she had ventured to plead his son's cause, warned her to attempt at least no present efforts in his favour.

"I will," she answered, gently.

Lord Rotherham bowed an involuntary bow of thanks, pressed her hand in thanks, and then to take a general leave. Mrs. Egerton and Geraldine followed him into the back drawing-room to take a more particular farewell.

"The wind is sharp," said Mrs. Egerton, removing her husband's great-coat, which she had hastily fetched up from the hall. "Now to rob you by putting this on. There is an almost autumnal feeling in the air this afternoon; and we have all noticed that you have not been looking at all bonny—so warm and pale."

"A polite manner of implying something not at all complimentary," he answered, laughing. "I assure you I am warmly clad, and have no need to rob your husband of his coat."

A brief conversation followed, in the course of which it was arranged that Lord Rotherham should dine in Wimpole Street the following evening. As yet he had said nothing of Lettice, and an instinctive delicacy kept Geraldine from asking when he intended to break the news to her. Mrs. Egerton unconsciously came to her aid.

"I do hope," she said, "that what has happened may not prove unacceptable to your friends at large, and your dear children in particular?"

"At my age, verging on forty," he answered, "I may be excused, I think, from

going the round of my acquaintance, hat in hand, to collect their suffrages. As to the children, Geraldine has taken all their hearts by storm—her coming will be like spring to them.”

Geraldine thought of Ralph, and of the apprehensive glances—at the time little understood—that he had cast upon her, and felt guilty and uneasy.

“And now, good-bye!” and raising her hand, Lord Rotherhame kissed it.

“Come, come!” said Mrs. Egerton, merrily, “this is a most unaccountably cold and formal method of proceeding. I think you may give her something better than a kiss on her hand.”

“May I?” and bending, with an air of reverential tenderness, he gravely kissed her cheek.

An inauspicious fate willed that at this precise moment Mrs. Egerton should open the folding-doors to escape into the drawing-room, and Geraldine, in the act of receiving her lover’s brief caress, encountered, through the aperture, a stony stare from two protuberant eyes, which the next moment were rapidly withdrawn from view.

“Dr. Bogle!” she cried, breathless between consternation and amazement. “He was looking! He saw—What are we to do?”

“Did Dr. Bogle see?” exclaimed Lord Rotherhame, half-laughing, half-disgusted.

"Never mind, it can't be helped; as soon as I am gone you must make a declaration, and rescue us both from eternal disgrace. Here, before we part, little girl, is something in exchange for the token you once gave me," and taking her hand, with a rather painful flush on his cheek, he fitted a dazzling diamond ring upon her finger, and then, without waiting for thanks, hurried from the room.

He walked down the street and crossed the Park at a rapid pace. It seemed as if he fled from the self of the last two hours, the smiling, cheerful self, which, now that he was once more alone, looked to him a very stranger. Again a deep melancholy settled on his features, and his eyes, losing their brightness, appeared, to adapt the Psalmist's forcible phrase, "to fail in looking inward."

"So now farewell," he thought, "farewell for ever, vain dreams of eternal love, delusive faith in the inviolable sanctity of troth plighted in a by-gone Eden. Wife! child! old bliss! old loves! good-bye all! What have I to do with you? I, the prosperous widower, who, in middle life, am about to take to myself a young and pretty partner. Farewell willingly, since with you go fears, ever recurring struggles, sickening uncertainties, and the new crime of a child's heart broken. Little Geraldine, when the judgment is set, and the doom pronounced,

may my guardian angel record in my favour this one good deed—that I have restored the light to your sad eyes, and dried the tears on your soft cheek.”

A certain weight had in truth passed from his heart, since his second marriage had become a settled thing. Perhaps it was that mingling with the motives he had alleged to Geraldine, as of sufficient weight to change his life-long resolution, he had recognised the necessity, in which his engagement would involve him, of breaking off the hesitation that for years had made of his soul a tortured battle-ground between the powers of good and evil. Well-nigh prostrated by this ceaseless inward strife, he now felt, with something like thankfulness, that the die was cast, that henceforth duty would be on the side of interest, and honour seal his lips for ever from the confession which, if uttered, must plunge the innocent girl he had sworn to cherish in irretrievable agony and ruin. The alarm into which the unforeseen reappearance of his foster-brother had plunged him, Ralph's dangerous knowledge, and Middleton's deadly enmity, these all, though insufficient in themselves to convict him as a felon, combined to inspire him with a kind of panic, and he now resolved within himself on a course he had never yet dared to take. He would go down, without more delay, to the Castle, and destroy the documents which, if discovered,



would enable his enemies to bring guilt to his door.

Geraldine, when she first re-entered the front drawing-room, could not summon courage to cast a glance in the direction of the outraged Doctor. Robert's grin, however, did not escape her notice, and it seemed to her little short of diabolical. He was plainly triumphing in the thought of how he had disgraced her in her father's eyes, and she laughed inwardly when she reflected how soon his mirth would be changed to mourning.

"So, my darling," said the Archdeacon, tenderly, "he is actually gone, is he? You don't feel very desolate, I hope!"

"*He is gone! Who is gone?*" roared the Doctor.

"My father is speaking of Lord Rotherhame," she answered, calmly.

The Archdeacon hastily interposed—

"I was forgetting," he said, "you have not heard of the great event of the day. This dear child will be a near neighbour of yours in future. Geraldine has this morning accepted Lord Rotherhame as her future husband.

"The Earl—married—to your daughter!" The Doctor spoke with awful distinctness, and made a prolonged pause for breath between each syllable. "Impossible! you must have made a mistake. He will never take another wife."

"I am scarcely likely to speak on such a subject without due authority. The mistake is yours," returned the Archdeacon, coldly. "Diney, if you are coming to church with me you had better go and put on your bonnet. In ten minutes we ought to be starting."

The two girls rose at once with dimpling lips, and held out their hands to say "Good-bye."

Mechanically the Doctor and his son took them, too paralyzed with horror and amazement to speak another word. But as the door closed on the sisters, and a faint echo of their laughter from without penetrated the drawing-room, Robert, as if awaking from a trance, seized by the arm his father, still incapable of action, and muttering in his ear, urged him to depart. Contrary to their hospitable wont, neither the Archdeacon nor his wife pressed their guests to linger, and having blurted out stupified adieux, the ungainly pair relieved the house of their presence.

For once the Doctor's presence of mind had completely failed him, and he felt incapable of grasping the full significance of the Archdeacon's appalling announcement. Robert also was conscious that no language would do justice to the occasion, and it was not till father and son had gained the safe retreat of a Waterloo 'bus, and were jolting along Pall Mall, that they at last found words in which to vent their mortification and baffled spite.

Too late their eyes were opened to perceive how completely they had cut their own throats as regarded all future intimacy at the Castle. Too late they bitterly regretted the fatal day when they had invited the Arch-deacon to bring that "cocky girl of his" to enjoy the hospitality of Rotherhame Rectory.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

Fast bound in misery and iron.

I thought to meet no more, so dreary seemed  
Death's interposing veil, and thou so pure,  
Thy place in Paradise beyond where I could soar.

KEBLE.

THE announcement of Lord Rotherhame's approaching second marriage was regarded by the world of London society as a special bounty of Providence to eke out its fast dwindling stock of gossip in the tedium of a protracted season. The sensation produced by the intelligence was considerable. Lord Rotherhame had been accredited with the rare distinction of being a widower indeed, and maternal match-makers lamented too late that they had suffered his melancholy and reserved bearing to delude them into the conviction that his heart was a closed shrine, consecrated for ever to the memory of the dead. That he should have chosen a mere child, fresh from a country parsonage, to rule his house and hearth was the crowning singularity of this inexplicable man, and various romantic or ill-natured stories were rife in explanation of the mystery.

Lord Rotherhame knew in what way his second marriage would be interpreted, and with his usual cynical indifference to public opinion took no pains to account for what he

had done, or to shield his dead wife from the apparent slight upon her memory. He even took a bitter pleasure in admitting that it was a slight, and in the letter in which he first acquainted the Duchess of Naseby with his altered prospects, requested her congratulations on the successful manner in which he had at length achieved the moral burial of his dead.

"You need no longer accuse me of sacrificing common-sense to sentiment," he wrote. "A four years' widowhood may, indeed, go beyond the absolute *requirements* of social decency, but it can hardly be said to merit the deep condemnation implied by the term 'extravagant!'"

The Duchess knew him well enough fully to appreciate the bitter irony of his self-vindication, and she agreed with the world in condemning his choice of a step-mother for his children, but, true to her Broad Church creed of universal liberty, and convinced that the thing was inevitable, she made no effort to hinder it; and after giving vent to her disapprobation in an expressive shrug, contented herself by writing him off a sheet of good-natured sarcasms.

"Send the children to spend six weeks with me at Grand Court before I start for the East," she concluded. "They would only spoil the fun of the love-making, and you should get your young lady to come and stay with you at Rotherhame, and make the ex-

periment of how the *solitude à deux* suits you, before the fatal knot has tied you together for good and all."

For his aunt's suggestion with regard to the children, Lord Rotherhame was sincerely grateful. Deeply as he loved them, the sight of their young faces disturbed him, and rendered it less easy for him to stifle memory and live in the new interests he had chosen. He had found, with mingled surprise and thankfulness, that the news of his engagement had pleased them.

A kind of horror that her mother's sacred place could be given to any other had, indeed, been Lettice's first emotion, but the shadow that rested on her home—a shadow real and perceived, although vague, and its wherefore uncomprehended—and the feud between her father and brother, ending in Berkeley's flight from home, had agitated and saddened her, and it was small wonder that in the prospect of having her fond sympathising girl-friend to live with her, joy should predominate over regret. With mixed sensations of nervousness and longing, she anticipated her first interview with Geraldine, but before it could take place Lord Rotherhame had availed himself of the Duchess's invitation, and at less than a day's notice Miss Oliver and her pupils had found themselves in the train, flying through the country on their way to Grand Court.

The Egertons' departure from town took

place a fortnight later. Lord Rotherhame's visits during the interval had been rarer than circumstances altogether warranted, but stress of business was his plea, and his bride-elect overlooked all deficiencies in the entrancing prospect of a visit to Rotherhame during the month of September. The season had been unusually prolonged; Parliament had sat till the middle of August, and even after the Prorogation, when all the world had taken flight to the cool country, Lord Rotherhame lingered on in town. He dreaded, with a nervous dread, the first sight of his home under this altered aspect of affairs, and the inevitable revival it must bring of memories whose mocking sweetness maddened him. There, too, he must encounter Mr. Daubeney—his dead wife's devotee, his lost boy's partisan. He would have given up a year's income could he have packed him off to Grand Court after the children. But this was impossible, and so he lingered solitary in the big deserted house.

London was like a City of the Dead. The houses, with their endless succession of close-drawn blinds, looked as if they all held corpses. The Park, the Ladies' Mile, St. Stephen's, became ghostly regions, haunted by silence and the memory of vanished splendour. Mayfair and Belgravia were delivered over to the housemaids' tranquil reign; opera houses and exhibitions were closed, and the roads, picked open, emitted

horrid gaseous fumes with reckless prodigality. It was lucky that his acquaintances had all taken wing, for Lord Rotherhame, in his lonely rambles about the deserted West End streets, did not wear the aspect of a happy man. Removed from her presence, the kind of fascination that Geraldine exercised over him began in a measure to lose its force; old habit proved too strong for his resolutions, and he gradually thought less of her, and harped again with restless anguish on the old, old story of his lost love.

It was the middle of September, some days before the time fixed for the Egertons' visit, when Lord Rotherhame at last nerved himself to go back to the Castle.

The fancy seized him that unless he could have a quiet week there first, in which to mourn and meditate at ease, he could never face the effort of making merry with his guests. He sent no intimation of his coming home, but leaving Parsons and little Edward to follow by a later train, started early and reaching St. Dunstan's by four o'clock, set off on foot to traverse the world of woodland that shut away his ancient dwelling-place from the common haunts of men.

Summer yet lingered in its glory, but a solemn touch on flowers and foliage chastened its splendour, and gave warning of coming decline. A dreamy haze veiled the horizon in mystery; the stern heaths were



in one burst of sober bloom, and the only sounds that disturbed the stillness of the mellow air, were the occasional whirr of a pheasant through the oaks, the caw of rooks as they flocked in companies to their roosting-place, or the sudden drop of a reddening apple from some gnarled orchard tree. Already some leaves had fallen on the grassy avenue and moat, and the grey Castle, towering high behind the trees, with the lazy sunshine lying broadly on its garb of ivy and honeysuckle, looked like the home of the Sleeping Beauty during its hundred years' enchantment.

The hush was like that which precedes a death, the hush which comes when life is softly sinking, tended by love and smiles, into the cold forgetful tomb. The Year going down towards his grave—the Year, smiled on by the sun, wept over by the dew, cheered by the kisses of flowers, was gently putting off the green robe of life, and preparing his limbs for the shroud of snow, which Winter was weaving for his burial.

Lord Rotherhame's arrival not being expected, the customary preparations had not been made, and he found the grass on the bowling-green long and mossy, and weeds springing up apace between the paving stones of the quadrangle. The kitchen pussies were dozing undisturbed by the rusty portcullis; and the peacocks strutting up and down the terrace, lords of

all they surveyed, looked on their master with scorn, as on an unauthorised intruder. "Their penetration does them credit," he reflected, drearily, and accepting the birds' rebuff, he turned away from the terrace, and wandered slowly down into the garden.

How soothing to be at home once more, now that he had nerved himself for the effort! How rich the sunshine on the trees and on the gay dahlias and rows of tall hollyhocks. What peace in those long shadows which crept athwart the grass! repose even in their sadness.


Death and Life were meeting face to face on this waning day of early autumn, and for the moment both looked beautiful. From his stern, cold brother, Life caught a solemnity that deepened his gay glitter into gold, and in exchange he flung back from his own bright face a poetic gladness on Death's grim features. Could this place always have remained empty—quiet as now—a hermitage to which he might retreat to dream, weep, and think unnoticed, Life would have looked to Lord Rotherhame less unbearable, he could have put on a smile, and gone back into the world more bravely. But that might be never more! Laughter must desecrate its silence, a modern love sit upon the throne of the old, the feet of the new wife tread the grass that waved over the forsaken dust of her who was dead. So be it! such had been the world's way ever since Creation. Life was a mockery,

a bad joke made by Providence in malice for its own amusement !

With deep sadness, and deeper longing, he recalled his home-comings in the days gone by, so strangely, blessedly different to this unwelcomed return. "Memory rose to do her wonted work," and a fair slight form walked again by his side, and the imagined "touch of a vanished hand" sent a shock of passion through his withered heart. They two were wandering, hand in hand, among the flowers, as Adam and Eve had wandered in Eden, and he could see the love-light kindle in her unfathomable eyes. High, unapproachable, even then, albeit all his own, a woman to be possessed, a saint to be adored !

He longed to kneel and kiss the sward that her feet had trodden. Half human, half divine—his wife had been to him, though he scarcely knew it, a godlike incarnation ! and in losing her he had lost his religion and his all.

The sight of Mr. Daubeney coming towards him at a few yards' distance recalled him abruptly to present reality. He would willingly have deferred this meeting, had it been possible to have drawn back without actual rudeness. The first glance showed him that his Chaplain's face was grave and embarrassed, and Lord Rotherhame's discomfort increased to positive pain. He held out his hand and spoke hurriedly, and in a tone of cordiality obviously forced.



"Well, Daubeney, here I am at last, you see. It seems an age since we met."

"More than six months," returned Mr. Daubeney, with a slight stammer. "You will take everyone by surprise. Do they know of your arrival in the house?"

"No, I walked from the station and have only this moment entered the garden. What a lovely evening! You should have been buried in smoke and dust the whole summer as I have been, to appreciate it properly."

"The session has been extraordinarily protracted," said Mr. Daubeney, instinctively avoiding, in these first minutes of meeting, all allusion to the subject which was engrossing both their minds.

"And it is always a dreary task to watch the last struggles of an expiring Parliament. Shall we take a turn round the garden before we go in? Even in the sunny Riviera you have sometimes sighed, I expect, for the green woods of old England."

Passing under a low carved archway they descended to the shady depths that bordered on the fish-ponds, where in the sylvan gloom bees hummed among the drooping fuchsias, and the barberry showered its blood-red fruit upon the velvet turf. Here the rather awkward conversation dropped. Lord Rotherhame and his Chaplain had been intimate too long to keep up trivial talk for form's sake, and Lord Rotherhame was inwardly fevered by Daubeney's significant

avoidance of all allusion to his approaching marriage.

"You are not in such a hurry to congratulate me as most of my friends have been," he broke out, abruptly, after a few moments of disagreeable silence.

Daubeny reddened.

"You forget," he said, nervously, and with a certain cold ring in his voice which no effort could cover, "I wrote to you almost immediately after the news reached me through Dr. Bogle, but it is not surprising that among your many congratulatory letters, mine should have escaped your memory. Anyway, you know how warmly I wish you happiness. Miss Egerton is, from my remembrance of her, both beautiful and gifted—and good, Archdeacon Egerton's daughter can hardly fail to be."

"Nor my wife you should add," answered Lord Rotherhame, with sardonic sharpness in his laugh. "Goodness would naturally be a *sine quâ non* with me! But you are quite right," he added, changing his tone, "she *is* good, a thousand times too good for my deserts. I am a very happy man."

There was an open defiance in the last words. He flung them down as a champion his gauntlet, and looked Daubeny straight in the face. The Chaplain shrank into himself.

"I don't doubt it," he answered quickly, and then continued in a lighter tone. "You

are expecting the family down here shortly, I believe."

"Next week ; they have promised to spend a fortnight with me."

"You must be looking forward to showing her her new home in its autumnal glory."

"And none can blame me if I do," was Lord Rotherhame's fierce rejoinder, all his nerves jarred by the veiled bitterness of Daubeney's tone. "It is but common-sense to profit by what little pleasure is to be got out of this worthless world, and I have suffered so much from perpetual harping on the past that I have made up my mind henceforward to abjure the practice."

This plain speaking took the gag from Daubeney's lips, and, sensitive as a knight for his lady's honour, he answered vehemently—

"It is fortunate that it is possible for you to forget what I cannot, who knew her only as a friend. I dwell upon her blessed memory from day to day, and the radiance it sheds hallows for me the world which *you* call worthless ! Forgive me if I have spoken unadvisedly," he added ; "you have, without doubt, the right to act in this respect exactly as you please, and if the step you are taking is for your own and your children's happiness, your friends should certainly not quarrel with it."

"A few civil nothings tacked on to the end of your speech cannot efface the impression of the unjust, injurious charge that went

before," and Lord Rotherhame's cheek grew pale with anger. "As usual, Mr. Daubeney, you are not slow to misjudge me, but on the present occasion the grossness of your misconception is surpassed by the presumption which has led you to judge of my feelings by your own! You said correctly enough that you were only Lady Rotherhame's *friend*. I was her *husband*, and the remembrances which produce in you a pleasing melancholy are to me death by slow torture! Moralize to me as you will, but for cold pity's sake, refrain in future from striking where I am most vulnerable and most defenceless. God has smitten me! Is it an essential part of Christian duty for His ministers to follow suit?"

Daubeney was appalled by the violence of the tempest he had raised.

"I was wrong and foolish to have spoken as I did," he answered, hurriedly, "I ought to know, better than anyone, the unique devotion that was between you two, and in my calmer moments I could not imagine that you would forget. But if so—you have yourself opened these burning questions, and I must say my say—how can you reconcile with loyalty to her, the harsh measure you have dealt out to her first-born child—her best-loved child, whom dying, she bade you specially to cherish for her sake."

Lord Rotherhame's eyes grew hard.

"I ask you as a favour not to couple her

name with his, Daubeney. Had she lived, he would have broken her heart."

"To refrain from coupling the names of mother and son, Lord Rotherhame, would be a mockery. The boy you have turned out of your house is bone of her bone, flesh of her flesh. You cannot injure him without injuring her."

"You speak in the dark altogether. Berkeley left my house of his own free choice, and in defiance of my express orders. It is strange justice to hold me responsible for that. I don't pretend I was sorry to be rid of the thankless task of looking after him."

"When you say he left you of his own choice it suits you to ignore the fact that he had been driven to desperation by your hard treatment, that it was you who had made his home so miserable that he preferred to throw himself on the mercy of a world of strangers."

"It may look more romantic, Mr. Daubeney, to paint me as an unmitigated ruffian, and my son as a virtuous martyr; but facts are stubborn things, and will not always accommodate themselves to the tasteful requirements of poetic justice."

"I paint no such picture, my Lord; I have never attempted to extenuate the fault which was the primary cause of Ralph's estrangement from you. But I hold that the hardness which will not pardon an offence, which closes the way of return to a soul that has

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once swerved from the path of duty, goes near the guilt of moral murder. What mercy can you expect from God or man if you have persistently denied it to your own child? There is not a person in the house, or in the neighbourhood that has not marked with wonder the continuous decline of his spirits and health. Have you forgotten the sufferings of your own youth? Did you never reflect how bitter it was for one of his age and temperament to be scorned and spurned, to struggle, against hope, to please, and not to win so much as one kind word in recompense? Could you not see that to ride a high mettled steed always on the curb was to goad him into madness? Ralph's boyhood was so cherished and so happy, that his sensitive nature pined when fortune changed with him, and now he has come to choose exile from home and family as preferable to longer endurance of the petty mortifications, the stinging ridicule, the half-veiled dislike that you inflicted on him."

"Your infatuation for that boy, my dear Daubeney, deprives you of your usually sound judgment. Do you imagine that my temporary severity was the real cause of his precipitate departure?"

"It certainly never occurred to me that there could be another," returned the Chaplain coldly.

"I tell you this then ; his flight was the consequence of an insult he offered me, an insult

so deadly that after it no son could look his father in the face. Do you know that only the day before he left me, your blameless martyr, your deeply compassionated victim of paternal cruelty, had flung me on the ground, struck me with a riding whip, spurned me with his foot! Your injustice has moved me to say this much in self-vindication," he continued, seeing the horrified amazement on Daubenys face, "but I shall give you no particulars. The whole story is fraught with such horror to me that I can scarcely endure to recall it even in thought."

"Struck you?" exclaimed Daubeny, to whose conscience, agonised by the least hairs breadth departure from the letter of the Commandments, this act seemed a crime of incalculable magnitude. "But it cannot be! You must be dreaming!"

"Would to God I were!" returned Lord Rotherhame with passionate emphasis. "But unhappily it is sober fact—a part of the soul-destroying misery of the last five years, which God or the Devil, I know not which, has invented for my ruin!

"Daubeny," he went on after they had walked a little way in silence, "you are wrong indeed if you think I could forget—could for one instant forget—my angel wife. But I am a desperate man. Like one drowning, in the first days of my bereavement, I clung to the hope of meeting and possessing her once more. Conscience now tells me

plainly that I never can be fit for the Paradise she inhabits. The chains of Hell have been wound about me, and I cannot rise to her. I sink without hope!"

Daubeny looked at him and shuddered.

"The Devil has indeed gained an appalling power over you! But he can only keep it by your own consent. What comes between you and the hope of salvation is your own wilful cherishing of revengeful passion."

"I know myself too well to imagine that I can ever forgive *him*."

"I believe you wrong yourself. Tell me what would your feeling be if at this moment he were brought home to you dead or dying? Would your anger outlive such a test as that?"

He hesitated.

"It is unlikely that I shall be put to such a test. In the course of nature the pleasant *rôle* of survivor will devolve upon my heir."

"The chances are very even; at all events it is wiser not to run the risk of bringing upon yourself the anguish of remorse that would assail you did your child die uncared for, unforgiven. Remember, however deeply he has transgressed, he is still your child, and much of the blame of his wrong-doing rests with you. Remember his youth, and the frailty of sinful human nature. Try, even now, to think of him with kindness. Forgive, that your own sins against your Father in Heaven may be forgiven, and that you

may be led back to that narrow path which alone can bring you to your wife's side again."

"If that were the sole obstacle!" said Lord Rotherhame, half absently. "No, Fate is too hard for me; you little dream of all that is involved when you counsel me to seek the path of right."

"What *can* be involved," said Daubeney, with increasing sadness, "that should not willingly be faced for such an end? To speak out plainly, and share your burden with a true friend, would be your best help; but it is useless for me to ask your confidence. I feel that I have neither the force of character nor the discriminating sympathy that you need; I have felt this long, and I cannot tell you how painfully. The sense of incapacity weighs me down. Let me say it now, while I have the courage. I must leave Rotherhame. I have been offered a curacy in the East of London; there I shall begin life anew under sterner and less congenial auspices. My work here is ended. Another might succeed where I have failed."

"To which of your brethren in the profession do you intend to turn over your refractory patient?" asked Lord Rotherhame, with a melancholy smile. "Do you think Dr. Bogle would do the work of conversion most skilfully, or Mr. Meules? But seriously, you don't mean what you say. You have often told me that you hoped to end your

days among us; and after all, I am not the only person at Rotherhame. The children love you, and it would grieve me much to see them deprived of your care. I know I have not done all I should to make life pleasant to you the last few months," he continued, when he found that Daubeny remained silent, "but now everything shall be different. My future wife is little more than a child; it is impossible that you should not like her. Think better of it! Don't desert us."

Daubeny's lips quivered.

"Impossible," he exclaimed, "I must go. I shall never cease to be grateful for the almost unexampled kindness you have shown me, and this parting will be to me one of keenest pain; but I could not stay here. To your bride I should be but a skeleton at the feast, and the memory of what has been makes it agony to me to stand by and see you deliberately turn your back on right and duty."

Lord Rotherhame's brow contracted.

"So breaks my last link with old times then," he said at last. "Well, so it be! It is foolish to do a thing by halves. Henceforward it shall all be thrown aside, and the Past, the sweet, sad, beautiful Past, shall be as though it had never been!"

There was a long silence which Daubeny was feeling too wretched to break; but as they crossed the drawbridge Lord Rotherhame spoke once more.

“And when is it to be, Daubeny? How soon do you depart, shaking off the dust of your feet against us?”

“The sooner the better, now that it is inevitable. But if you have no objection it would give me great pleasure to meet Miss Egerton before I go.”

END OF VOL. II.



